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## THE EUROPEANS

*by the same author*

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| poems       | DISPERSAL POINT<br>BEYOND THIS DISREGARD<br>SOUTH OF FORTY<br>TEN SUMMERS<br>ALMANACK OF HOPE<br>SELECTED POEMS            |
| fiction     | JACOBSON'S LADDER<br>AND LASTLY THE FIREWORKS<br>UNCLE ARTHUR AND OTHER STORIES<br>IT BREATHED DOWN MY NECK<br>ESTUARY     |
| satire      | LOW LIFE   |
| non-fiction | THE GREEN GRASS GREW ALL ROUND<br>WHO ONLY ENGLAND KNOW<br>WORLD STILL THERE<br>THE AIR BATTLE OF MALTA<br>ATLANTIC BRIDGE |

JOHN PUDNEY  
★  
THE  
EUROPEANS

*fourteen tales of a continent*



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*For*  
*Gwendolen Herbert*

## FORGIVE ME IF I PRAY

**MANY** people have mistrusted No. 7. Nevertheless I believe that his untrustworthy look is not so much his fault as sheer mischance. He has never seemed older than a student. Yet we who knew him in student days cannot fail to recall how as a student he always had the appearance of a fully mature man, a characteristic which infuriated us at the time since it gave him the air of stealing a march on us, of holding something in reserve, of taking advantage of powers unattainable to the rest of us. Now, however, in a situation where youth—or should we call it youthful flexibility?—has been such an asset, he has disarmed everyone by his exuberance, by his juvenescent brilliance, and by that immaturely charming enthusiasm (which, to be sure, I can never recall in him during student days).

A too-sensitive colleague might have mistrusted the emphasis which No. 7 has been placing upon the importance of our work to mankind. He has harked upon the irresponsibilities of power, the trivial resorts of powerful men, their frivolous chance decisions which alter the course of millions of hard-working lives all striving to leave nothing to chance. He has held up for approbation the universality of our work, how it has stood outside the realms of chance, of speculation, of unpredicted results, of unfair advantages.

No. 7 has suffered less from success or failure than any of us. No. 7 is like one who has acquired talents and character by inheritance. His very ease fills one with distrust in spite of the fact that he has had struggles no greater or less than the rest of us. No. 7, not to put too fine a point on it, has enjoyed the luck of the devil.

You will not be surprised therefore when I tell you that it has not been No. 7 who has been making the ultimate discoveries. 'These,' he said in the arrogance of his modesty, 'are acts of such significance to the future of the human race that I am often in two minds whether I am worthy to perform them. After living oneself, and indeed being so accustomed to live, in conditions of chaos and danger, it seems all the more strange to act without conditions or reservations but with a calculable purpose and an ascertained result. Is it some chance, some garish twist of fortune which has equipped me for this? Whatever it may be, I feel a great access of power. Who wouldn't? All of us at one time or another have felt that: but never, I hazard, so constantly as I, now . . .'

None of us could applaud the way it was said: nevertheless we knew it to be true in general. We men and women of many nations who may have wished at some time to serve self or homestead, community or country, with our talents, have suffered severally, and of course decorously, in witnessing the ruin of homestead and self, country and community as entities. Our individual salvation has always been our work, the rhythm of an abstraction. It was always fortunate that our absorption in palpable and progressive logic was never spoiled by personal, predatory hopes and loves and fears. No. 5, for example, has always been able to forget his own valley people (that militant but doomed rabble) except when he tasted the placid, albeit beckoning, wines which grow where the wise king in ancient times saw the snows first melting. No. 6 has been preoccupied by problems of cosmic importance, except possibly at those times when a dog barked in the small hours, and the sound of it carried with nonchalant and melancholy assurance across the teeming night of the plains. Each of us is, I suppose, stricken by some such fancy, some small personal adherence which the high purpose of our duties has never sufficiently quenched. I suppose that is

why we have distrusted No. 7 whenever he has spoken with such controlled modesty and attractive enthusiasm about the ultimate discoveries, and his own part in them, so unquestionably of inestimable importance.

The order of mankind will never be the same because of No. 7's work. The geography of our continent will change. Probably nations will vanish, for the balance of peoples will be restruck. It is certain that because of No. 7, the child which is being born at this moment—my child for example—will experience fundamentally different ways of life from those of its parents bounded by certain philosophies and will not be secured by human experience.

So I ask you to believe that I belonged to no community, no race, no nation, but only to this our time as I stood by No. 7 who had selected me from among all of us. I wish you to know that I obeyed that selection out of a sense of duty. It was my service to this time into which my child has been born.

No. 7 took me inside the outer casing of the experimental plant and explained the necessity for all the precautions. He said: 'I have calculated everything; but I have made allowances for contingencies. You and I will stay within the outer casing. We have communication by telephone and radio with the people outside, all of whom of course have undergone a course of training. When they swing the airtight doors behind us, we shall be in an unparalleled position, at the very edge of the arena in which is determined the fate of our universe. I am sorry to talk of it quite so melodramatically; but there are few ordinary words which exactly describe such a situation—and ultimately I will, of course, get it all written down. Meanwhile you are my witness. . . .'

The doors whuffed: and we were alone in the subnormal pressure of the outer casing of the experimental plant. I was a little worried by the singing in my ears, normally a sensa-

tion which I am able to correct, when I am in control. I was much more worried when I observed how No. 7 proposed to set in motion the experiment within the inner casing. I could guess its nature. It was that one for which every one of us was waiting (a little envious perhaps of No. 7). Awe for that experiment, for that act, more definitive than treaties, more potent than all the decrees that bind us, almost stupefied me, but not to the extent of overwhelming my discomfort at the risk which No. 7 evidently contemplated.

He was about to use his hands to reach the inner casing. I can still think of no other method. He was about to make a visual recording of his experiment: I can think of no instruments which he was not already using which would begin to do the job. From the moment the doors shut behind me I could see the pattern of his intention, the colossal effectiveness of his execution, but I fell upon my knees like a peasant and prayed when I saw the sacrifice it would evidently cost him. I shouted, in that under-pressurised near-vacuum in which we should have made steady and exact observations. I beat my fists against the neat overall which No. 7 was wearing, and I must confess that I knelt.

His hands came off above the wrists and what pain it caused him I, his witness, will never know, for he lost his voice to cry with, his eyes to suffer with, his ears to listen to my comfort or exhortation.

It is useless to tax me further. I was but a witness to a man in whom I had little trust. My lack of trust was justified when I saw that he intended to use his hands, and to try to calculate in his head without devising instruments. I am justified, I repeat, because I never had trusted No. 7. But now it is suggested that I can salvage from his idiot gestures and the remains of his experimental plant some consequential pattern. The highest authorities declare that I can save mankind. We all know, they say, what happened. How it

happened, however, is locked within the still-living wounded sensibility of No. 7.

In the midst of him, at the intersection of sight with burnt-out eyes, and hearing with exploded ears, and speech with cloven tongue, where the stubs of his wrists stir in measured circles of impotence is the calm ascertainable truth. There is the calculation sealing the event which encompasses the civilised world. Now I ask you, how can I deal with his martyrdom, that untrustworthy streak which keeps him alive and silent? Forgive me if I fall on my knees. Forgive me if I pray.



## THE FLIRT

'THE lake is frozen!' She clutched the curtains of the lodge window as an old excitement took hold of her. She fretted against the solid nineteenth-century diamond panes. The window unstuck obstinately, and she leant out, looking towards the lake, saying again: 'The lake is frozen,' and hearing with ecstatic unconcern the old woman within murmuring: 'Mademoiselle will catch her death of cold.'

The Captain saw her as he loitered by, intending to give her good morning, perhaps to accept a cup of her coffee in a sociable way, and to convey to the others one of her formal invitations to afternoon tea. She entertained only at tea, which suited the narrow confines of the lodge. She chose her guests carefully, some said inscrutably, but relying very slightly upon advice which the Captain sometimes gave her over a formal cup of coffee through the window. There had been occasions when she had made up small parties for those who were not officers: yet she had received the General and his staff with complete composure at the shortest notice.

Seeing her at the window, the Captain observed for the first time some of the unspent vitality of her youth, which her manner curbed, and a touch of that inherent mocking gaiety she had forsworn perhaps when she left the mansion, and ammunition boxes had been stacked upon the bloodstains and mud of the courtyard, and grass had grown up round the boxes. The Captain's face lit up. He strode over to the window and stood with a newly acquired courtliness, as alien to the technical school where he had been educated as it would have been at the tennis club where he first learnt about love.



'Mademoiselle will catch her death of cold,' he said, his cautious, homely eyes for the first time hastening towards hers. A second later, though, they closed in a long astonished blink, acknowledging not only the banged window but also the wonderfully disturbing laughter of a private joke.

There was a tea-party in the afternoon into which no echo of that laughter intruded: but Mademoiselle announced with a curious secretive sparkle that she had been down to the lake and that the ice was going to be good. She assumed, turning with acid humility towards the Major, that the 'authorities' (her glance lingered upon his stout, belted, efficient, guileless person) had no objection to the lake being frozen and to skating upon the lake.

You could see the Major mentally running over his standing orders, as his eyes checked covertly with those of the Quartermaster. You could see the weak tea in the very thin cup quiver slightly against the diamond which made Mademoiselle's hand look old. 'But Mademoiselle would surely catch her death of cold . . .' the Major began, anxious, at all costs, to avoid the social error of talking official business over the teacups.

'Mademoiselle has felt the cold these many years, Major: and *healthy* cold will never do her any harm. The point is whether the authorities . . .'

'Allow me, Mademoiselle, to suggest that we omit official business at the tea-table.'

'But my aunt was shot at the tea-table. Surely that sets a precedent for almost any business?' Mademoiselle's smile was like the glint of her diamond: but the old serving-woman put down some things on the side table with a clatter, and crossed herself, breathing like a horse.

The Major, the Quartermaster, the Captain and the other two were trained men. Only their eyes moved in the cramped

cosy lodge room. The Major said: 'There may have been exceptions while we were in a state of emergency, but, in normal times, we observe the conventions.'

The serving-woman picked up the things then and carried them unsteadily, preoccupied with a prayer for Mademoiselle's aunt, the old mistress: and the tea-party continued with ferocious suavity. Why did she entertain them, the Captain was thinking, his technician's mind so long accustomed to calculated balances? What, wondered the Major, conning the manuals of his training, is in her mind when she smiles at me like that and her very courtesy is almost subversive? How is it, the Quartermaster was asking himself, that this woman puts me at my ease, seducing me at once from statistics, the rights and wrongs of this and that, and the interpretation of so many statutes? And the two others, the young ones, so worldly in the experience of so few women, were trying to arrive at her age, at her inmost mystery screened by the diamond which made her hand look old, by the easy individual style of her dress which made her middle-aged, by the swift inflexions of her voice which proclaimed her youth, and by the controlled innocent loveliness of her face which wholly foxed them.

The next day, skating was permitted, proclaimed and promulgated by notices, one of which was handed to Mademoiselle. Following tradition, villagers came with chairs and with skates for hire: and their wood-fires sent up pale shafts of smoke between the pointed trees. There were men with brooms: there were dogs: there were boys on slides: there were the usual heavy girls who seemed to imperil the ice but who moved like feathers. They all came across the fields, avoiding the drive which was out of bounds, setting foot on the estate again with traditional freedom and glancing curiously at the massive ochre façade of the mansion with its windows enigmatic and its general appearance desolate,

belying the flag over the portico and the excessive smoke from the military kitchens.

Not so much as a whisper as a sigh passed through all of them, like movement in the fir trees promising snow, when Mademoiselle came hurrying down the private path leading to the boat-house. She was wearing clothes which most of them could remember, a dark green skating costume trimmed with scarlet, and her serving-woman ran behind with the camp-stool and the boots.

A few of the garrison possessed skates: others had hired them at a good price from the villagers. The officers had evidently been fortunate enough to chance upon those monogrammed sets which had been kept carefully greased these many years in the gun-room of the mansion. The Captain, in particular, was well shod: he sped towards Mademoiselle and saluted. She nodded back, over the heads of those who were fixing her skates. 'Mademoiselle will shortly be catching her death of cold,' she called, turning away to speak to a forester.

'It is the warning board,' the man was saying. 'The one we always put up against the outflow from the sugar-beet factory.'

'And should I know where it is?' She laughed.

'It was always kept by the lodge.' The old man's voice was lowered respectfully. 'The lodge where you are staying.'

'Oh well, then, we've chopped it up for firewood ages ago,' said Mademoiselle, springing to her feet.

Whatever she may have been in the varied, exciting, tragic, light-hearted and solemn moments of her life, she was a flirt on skates. The sweeping circle she drew round the officers was entrancing. The Major, the Quartermaster, the Captain and the two rather susceptible young men in that instant cast aside doubt, reservation, diffidence and caution. All their several looks were an obeisance. Mademoiselle whispered across the

ice like a caress. Her movements smiled. Her speed was abandoned laughter. When she was near them, they saw in her face a teasing happiness which played upon every watching heart. During the brief sunlight of the afternoon, she sported with them, and the older villagers stood by as grave as the fir trees, in happiness recollecting the past and in present doubt and wonder. The precariousness of living in such times in such a country was almost forgotten; just as the reserve of Mademoiselle was lost in flashing and easy grace. The skaters danced to a concertina, dogs barked, children shouted. There were tumbles, there were races, there were figures, there were games.

As the red sun fell towards the spires of the stiff trees and the mansion windows kindled with an ancient merriment of gold, Mademoiselle recalled her oldest, most favourite game of all, which she called her 'Pony and Sledge'.

'Slip your scarf through my belt, Major. There, like this. Now hold on, all five of you, and keep time like good soldiers. One-two, and, three-four. The pony will pace you. The pony will run you off your feet.'

They sped away, gently, gracefully; and, like a sigh in the fir trees promising snow, the villagers commented: 'Look at her now.' Skimming, like laughter itself, she led them laughing in a wide sweep of the lake: and suddenly the serving-woman, the forester and a score of others spoke at once. Their voices rose to a distant confused shout which was just perceptible to the singing ears of the Major as 'Pony and Sledge' wheeled round by the sugar-beet factory. They were going at the pace of their hearts, their lips full of dried laughter, their eyes full of the sun's gold, when Mademoiselle eased her belt, and lightly skated even faster away from them. They were barely aware of that feathery flight and were wondering if it was fancy or if they really heard the words 'Mademoiselle won't catch her death of cold', when the thin

ice parted beneath them, and they descended, strictly in order of rank, into the waters of the factory outflow.

The day the snow came, Mademoiselle awoke with her hand to her head, fearing that she might indeed have an indisposition: but she immediately realised that the hammering was outside her window. The frame unstuck more obstinately than usual, because of the snow. The man hammering kept his back to her and continued his work. She recognised with surprise the old warning notice which was erected every year when the lake froze, and which she herself had laid out of reach of the forester, in the scullery loft. It had been placed in the trim grass path which led from the drive to her lodge door. When the man drove home his last nail and stood aside, she observed that it had been repainted. Looking sideways at it, she could just read the legend '*Out of Bounds to All Ranks*'. With a smile like the glint of her diamond, and an effort which sounded like a sob, she banged the window.

## THE EXORCISM

THE place where the little girl had been blown up became—as places marked by atrocity sometimes will—quite celebrated among people from many lands. Fed realised, of course, that it was not because of the little girl that people made pilgrimages. Nevertheless, it was her being blown up which retained, in his mind, amid all the horrors which darkened it, a clean, dead image like a stone monument in a clearing congealed by lightning.

Gradually he became better able to describe the outrage in an interesting manner: but of that one image he never spoke. With lightning clarity, it stood in the shadows of his mind: and the more and more people arriving to see the place were all unaware of it. In sorrow and in respect, in curiosity and in reverence, they sought the scene of the atrocity: and, though they had been by the years of violence numbed by such stories, they saw in this place a symbolic manifestation of all that mankind had suffered. They almost savoured the stench of death among the flowers and at first recoiled when Fed presented them with little souvenir bunches to be taken away to many lands and laid in shrines or pressed in books. They almost heard the wickerings of anguish, of consciousness disembowelled, amidst the gentle whish of evergreens: and they were often startled by the soft penetration of Fed's voice when he recited his litany of the probable numbers of deaths and of the manner of dying which he had got from the spectacled officer, the statistician, who had worn decontaminated clothes.

The first people to have appreciated Fed's guidance had been men in uniform from many countries: and to these

first-comers Fed had owed his survival. They had rarely given him money but, when his knowledge of the place had been useful, they had left him odd packets of food or smokes, putting down their presents upon some flat stone in order not to run the risk of touching him.

'You were here when it happened, of course?' these important people in uniform sometimes said: and Fed, overawed by their manners, had nodded inconclusively and swept out his right hand in a gesture. It did not do to discuss the details with such personages who knew everything. Their sympathy was more readily aroused by silence and by that gesture with the right hand, the hand which had, in fact, taken the money and which now moved of its own accord in restive expiation.

Then there had come officials and statisticians who had measured everything and photographed everything and who had to be placated by a thousand speechless nods and sighs and shrugs: and the aimless wilful hand flourished itself before them with good effect. They had begun by ordering Fed away, by organising him into some category or other. But there were many other things for them to do and their terms of reference had never suggested that there would be human beings in that place, so they came to ignore Fed, accepting with official condescension such small services as he could offer.

Afterwards, more and more plain people had come, bringing cameras and food, and, with apparent innocence, wanting to know every detail of the outrage which had physically faded out of that place, leaving only flowers, the evergreens and the wind. Fed was always wanted for the photographs: and he built up his story bit by bit from the questions people asked. He starved no more. He began to feel justified in being in that place. There was no longer any need for reticence and caution. The victims were dead

and all those who had ordered the atrocity were said to be dead. One need no longer be on the watch in case they came back. The statistician had said that there had been vengeance. He had said that it had been scientifically worked out and audited. He meant that those who had given Fed the money in the woods were neatly executed: and miraculously it seemed possible that these had forgotten to mention the transaction, the easy swift selling of the place, the clearing in the woods and his right hand sweeping through the dead air of that winter, just before news of the atrocity fell like a bruise upon the heart in so many lands.

Now tourists came, who fancied the smell of death, and paid Fed with greater and greater generosity as his tale got better and better. His savings grew and he buried them in the clearing on the side where the sun shone, well away from the spot where *their* money lay hidden awaiting the time when, he had hoped, one or other of those who had paid him might sneak back. For the clean, dead image in his mind of a little girl blown up was his shrine awaiting expiation and vengeance.

'So you were here when it happened? Standing across there by the clearing of the wood . . . and you escaped . . . they spared you somehow? Then you just hid . . . how interesting . . . you couldn't think or act or run away? So you have been here from that day to this . . . what you must have been through . . . yet it looks almost normal now. Just stand over there among the flowers, if you don't mind, while I get you in focus . . . there . . . well, they had their deserts . . . hanging's too good for them for a thing like this. We don't need all this food, by the way . . . I wonder if you . . . and here's a little money.'

Fed watched their faces as he told his tale. For the first time in his life, men and women were listening to words of his. For the first time he, in all his meanness, was not



despised by people. Apart from his own terrible shrine, with its image, there was not much about the outrage which he remembered, apart from the smell of death and the keening of those who were dying. So he began to elaborate; and his lies, at first timid, fattened with the interest and approbation which they caused, just as his own mean body put on weight with the gifts of food, the tips and the satisfying effect which his very presence engendered.

'If only all you victims could see me now, the despised Fed, telling your tale, with strangers from many lands hanging upon the very words from my lips.' Thus he would think to himself: but inevitably at such moments he would be aware of that right hand of his, treacherously gesticulating.

He was at his best one fine morning when a soft breeze from the south lifted the eyes of the flowers like innocent people and went whish through the evergreens like the sighs of people safe and contented. His story had never sounded so good to him, nor had it ever been told with more gratifying effect. Full of his own mean, grudging confidence, he glanced from face to face, calculating what his left hand would receive from this attention—for he had never again entrusted money or gifts to his wanton right hand.

It was almost at the end of his discourse when he noticed the priest who seemed to be in charge of a party of young men, too young to have anything but childish memories of the outrage in that place. Fed paused because the priest took off his sun-glasses and, with dark suddenness, bored into his confidence. Fed rambled and his story became incoherent, so that the tourists murmured among themselves, saying how he must have suffered, that speaking of it this long time afterwards caused him such pain.

For the first time in many years, Fed was recognising an individual face. He could not place the features. They belonged to none of the victims; nor did they belong to those

against whom he treasured vengeance in the shrine of his mind. He had no further control of his speech, while he tried to recall the priest's features. He dreaded that moment to which he usually looked forward, when the tourists filed up to him one by one with their tokens of thanks for his left hand. When his mouth became dry and no further words came, and the snapshots had been taken, the flowers and the bright day and the evergreens faded from his mind. As money dropped into his left hand, and odd parcels of food were deposited at his left elbow, the clean, dead image of the little girl blown up filled his mind. When the priest, who came last, began to speak, there was no will in Fed's body, only the lasting outrage of fear. The priest said: 'You have been telling lies, Fed. There is not one word of truth in what you have told these people. Let us move off and have the truth.'

Through blind sunlight, they retreated from the cheerful sound of the tourists and the wind-whispers of the haunted place. Soon they stood in the clearing, and Fed's right hand seized a spade, delving and digging its way obstinately towards the money it had taken. When that grave had been scooped out, the priest spoke again. 'I listened to your story, Fed, but I recognised you at once. I knew your right hand which took the money from those who have been long since hanged. As I prayed in this clearing on the night of the outrage for their souls and for those of the victims, myself disguised in their violence, I recall the first digging of this grave. I have only one recollection now of the outrage itself . . .' Fed felt his knees sag and his blood draining out of him, for he knew what the priest would say and had no power, even though he was still armed, to halt the words. ' . . . and that is the image of a little girl blown up'.

'My daughter!' Fed tried to ward off death with the two swollen, husky words.

'I know,' the priest said. 'That is why I came back. You

waited for your revenge against those who killed. I bring only the torment of the forgiveness of those who were slain.' The priest smiled as he spoke: and Fed's body sank into the grave, his right hand clutching in its last death grip that money which was the price of betrayal. The priest murmured as he lifted the spade and put back the earth. Then he rejoined the young people, his flock, who had been enjoying a picnic at the distant edge of the exorcised place.

## THE TONGUE OF A DOG

HIS mind had made the journey so often, before his body. He had come out of some great pit, the deep horrible bondage of the mind and the body: and so the movements of his thoughts and of his limbs had been slow. There is no doubt that what saved the one from stagnation and the other from paralysis was the thought of Vera, the pale girl who grew up under strange spells in the mountains behind his village and who might in former times have become a holy woman or a witch. But for her, his big body would have flagged and his mountainy mind, already chilled with horrors, would have fallen into the everlasting glacial silence of death.

So his journey home had been slow. Nobody knew how far he had come or by what instinct and chance, what study and perseverance, he had found the way. As he had passed through cities, taking odd jobs to keep himself, his wits had sharpened. As he had passed through cultivated and fertile valleys, he had earned for himself good food, sometimes holiday wine, sometimes love. Such men as he had long learnt to take all that came, shouted orders or love in whispers, swill in a tin or the smooth city drinks which sent a flush through the body, prayers, threats, speeches about justice, bullets fired low, the loves of expediency, the loves of opportunity. But like a star seen from the depth of the pit was Vera, cool, half-remembered. Under the lash, or snug in bed, or crouching over an oxy-acetylene welder, that star was tempered always with his few thoughts.

In all events, in all the ponderous irresponsible crush of events, the star was fixed, at the top of the world in the village in the high mountains where he had been born. He

had no desire to be anywhere but in that place, high and light, with its brief painted summers when you heard the fountains plashing and there were tourists with untold wealth, and with its long winters with the warmth of company in the white loneliness. Vera had walked, in the painted summers, in the higher places: and in the winter Vera had gone to church in furs.

He gave up his job of washing dishes as the summer came to an end and the people who waited for the scraps began to riot in the small hours, calling attention to the place. He was now self-assured, as well as cunning, and he slipped away suddenly while the people were rioting and the old stones of that riverside city became slippery with the scraps and the blood of those who got hurt. He had enough money to reach his own village, and he was tall again and handsome and laughing, cunning as a politician, ruthless as a frontier-guard. He could talk all the tongues now, knew all the secret jokes, recognised death in all its forms: and, in spite of it all, there stole over him, body and soul, an overwhelming longing for his own place, for the devout old people, the high peaceful air and the simple rhythm of the seasons' sweat. Desire for Vera, pale and remote, strong, fragrant with the high meadows of the snow-line, was the very air and light of this image of his own place.

It was early morning when he shouldered his pack and followed the river through the suburbs, where people glanced at him and looked away over the tidy roofs and gardens to face the fears of that day's living. He walked through shallow water and reached the destroyed town which for a whole week had appeared upon the strategic maps and even in the newspapers of the civilised world. He did not fear the idiot stares and took the opportunity to outwit a minor official on a matter of currency in a foetid, haunted cellar. There the mountains began. He followed a white road past the shrine

where once he had knelt in his wonderful ardour of innocence while somebody had played upon a pipe one of the old tunes which in former times were in everybody's head and feet so that their eyes and their ankles twinkled.

When he arrived he saw no one. There was little change, except for the inevitable destruction of old houses which always, owing to some mediæval planning, were in the line of fire. When he arrived, the dew sparkled and day had burst with a wide glory upon that high place. The corn was stooked; and distantly men, dazzled with work and light, stripped, corn-colour, bicycled into the terraced fields. Then for the first time he wondered how he should face Vera, who had been secret and timid for all her strength, as was the way of people of the mountains before they were 'improved' and their churchyards filled with green mounds. He wondered how he would face his old people amid those soft meadows he had dreamt of. In their ignorance and their awkward devout honesty, they would have waited for him, with some animal at hand no doubt, for a feast on his return and the flagon buried in the moss. Suddenly, in the sun and high air of his own place, he felt timid, unable to stride forward as he had dreamt, in his strength and beauty. Instead he stumbled eagerly, breathing the air. In the graveyard, with its many new graves, he sunk down into the lush grass and fell asleep, exhausted, in the very moment of his homecoming—the cherished thought which had defied the enemies of his body and mind.

The old man Toll, his uncle, kicked him and started back and stared, frightened, seeing his ghost. 'Thou that be dead,' he said, 'hath no right here in a lusty sleep in the noon's heat that be enough to kill thee.'

'I be not dead, Toll, nor a noonday ghost, but Johannus Toll whom they called the Strong.'

'Thou chooseth thine own pitch for thy sleep, then,' said

this ancient, fearing in his great age neither saint nor devil, but only the plain practical laws of the world which were seeping up through the valleys. He wagged his great arm to the painted crucifix rooted in the lush grass: and Johannus saw it for the first time in the pale violence of the noonday heat wherein his ancient uncle stole away. It commended to God's mercy his own person, with cheap painstaking lettering recording his birthday and all those names which he had these many years been careful to conceal. He stood and stretched and laughed. Here was the final homely image of that robust and callow youth whom Vera loved.

He shook it, and heaved the thing over his shoulder, smiling to himself that such a burden should weigh so light. He strode with it, laughing, through the cringing shadows of the village—and fortunately the people working in the fields were out of sight of him striding in all his strength and beauty, for they had endured much and in the square of the city in the valley one of their sons hung black and old, crucified as an example of something or other. 'I am Johannus Toll come home.' He laughed as he entered the gate and strode to the threshold of his own home where his own people and his girl Vera would be. The hills danced for him and the dew breathed up by the golden light of the sun, rose in white resplendence, embroidering in white and gold the high air. Such was the rich background of his maturity, his strength forged in agony, his beauty wrought by denial. His dark shadow was upon the threshold. He stooped because of the cross he hilariously carried and, laughing, thrust through where they crept back from him in the little familiar room.

'Here I am. Johannus!' he roared, flinging down that cross they had reverently made for him, scraping the money.

His mother was alive, russet, active, smiling, full of faith and proverbs. But as he stood there, he saw that precious wonder die in her eyes. No answer came from her.

Making the sign of her faith, the old woman lisped and began to speak with the tongue of a dog. All the golden afternoon, with the old man long since dead, and with the almost forgotten one before her, she stared and strove to speak, but spoke only with the tongue of a dog.

'And Vera, the pale girl who is mine?' said Johannus, when the old Toll, his uncle, came on tiptoe, sensing death or unhappiness in the house.

'Only thy mother can tell. The girl Vera was carried away, in the troubles which overwhelmed us, in the compulsion of the new laws, but most by the compulsion of thy death. She hath written to the old woman, thy mother, sending provision for her old age and for the upkeep of some memorial to thyself. Only thy mother, this old woman who speaks with the tongue of a dog, can tell whither she has gone: for we, with our troubles and with the harvest, must consider other things.'

'But she glares at me because I come with mine own cross?'

'So do we all.'

'And she speaks not. She is as a dog. And Vera is the very light I breathe, the star in the old dark I endured which blotted out the face of mankind.'

'Vera went when thou, in the long winters, died.'

The old woman came then and kissed the cross. And the neighbours, sweaty from the harvest and awe-stricken, their old ghosts driven out by the younger terror of the times, knelt bewildered by duty and by sleep while he, splendid in his strength and his beauty, questioned the empty husk of the old woman who spoke only with the voice of a dog, about the girl Vera of whom they now recollected so little.

Only the old woman, whose senses had fled before him, had ever heard from this Vera, who had gone to the plains, because he was dead, and because there was the compulsion of the new laws and all their dangers. So his journey was not



at an end. With the great beautiful strength, but with a fierce, cunning, worldly look in his eyes, he broke up his cross. Before their eyes, glazed with harvest tiredness and indignant wonder, he flung the pieces beneath his bright heel and then burnt them.

Then he descended into the valleys, seeking Vera in the haunted dangerous ways he had come.

## THE WHIM

THE General said: 'Today I will go to the lake.'

'Which lake, sir?' somebody said.

'Why, *that* lake where . . .' He was unable suddenly to finish the sentence. His self-importance had told him that he could choose any lake. His self-esteem prevented him from giving any reason for any one choice. His natural cunning, which was one of the elements of his success, warned him not to specify the lake where that drab had walked with unearthly grace.

They all waited for him to name it. They waited to order his car, to arrange his meals and his accommodation, to send word along the route that he would be coming, to advise units to be ready, and to issue instructions, if necessary, to local governors. He would formulate an order; they would express it. One of the elements of his success was the expertness with which he delegated authority.

The drab had walked with unearthly grace beside the lake where the old white steamer lay on her side and where the memory of the blasted village spilled into the water. There was no unit stationed there, for the villas were in ruins, the population was dispersed and the water was tainted. How had that grace survived in a place which was a sore upon the body of the landscape; how could that majesty exist in a place so defiled? And how, by all the saints, did that drab come to walk in the thoughts of such a successful general?

'He is in the hell of a temper,' somebody was whispering. 'It's going to be one of those days . . .'

Those days. He knew what they meant, how there was a tinge of admiration when they said it. He knew that the word

would go round with less and less admiration as it spread, with more and more respect or sullenness or . . . He would not go into that. In his great moments he had trusted his people: while he was taking his chances he had relied upon them: while his opportunities were still mustering about him he had been eager for their respect. Now the assurance of his greatness hung everlastingly in the air, all chances taken, all successes consolidated. Even his wife, who had always demanded so much, who had been so quarrelsome and turbulent in the old garrison days, who had fretted and intrigued during the painstaking years of slow promotion, pronounced herself satisfied with his honours. It was a round-about pronouncement made up of small flattering attentions, of vigilant applause, and of the most ungrudging participation with him in all public ceremonial acknowledging his success. Power suited her. Good works were like new clothes to her: and good works were never more in demand. She was always dragging him in: but she had just the right people for everything: and from time to time, always in public, she deferred most winsomely to him. He was accustomed to deference on all sides, but her enthusiasms never failed to ruffle him: and his men never failed to interpret the ruffle as 'one of those days'.

He was fatter. He was shorter-tempered. His success was like an undigested meal which he could still taste but not savour. He was used to it, but he was jealous of it, for he knew that it was out of all proportion. He had been fortunate to be of the right age at the right moment and to be given plenty of equipment and a good cause. Such a good cause in particular was an asset; for the people of his own country appreciated solemn, terse speeches without much appeal to the intellect and he had always made just such speeches—though they had, of course, been dismissed in his younger days as stupid. He was fatter: he was shorter-tempered.

'Bring the maps in, fool,' he boomed. 'How do I know which lake without seeing the map?'

'Might I suggest, sir, the map behind you on the wall, with the unit flags on it?'

Of course. He could have looked at that quietly in the first place, and made a decision. Was his memory getting worse, that memory which the Press described as 'memorising a landscape at a glance'? He stood up and pretended to give the whole matter weighty consideration. Then he said: 'I shall carry on alone. You needn't warn any of the units. Get me a vehicle I can drive myself: and put up some provisions.'

'But, sir!'

He turned, one hand still poised upon the map. It was one of his magnificent poses, decisive in a dozen famous campaign-conferences. He needed to say nothing to accompany it. His people melted away to do his bidding. Already there were whispers outside: 'A day of days. He's going off by himself . . . snooping. Better warn everybody. . . .'

The pose cost him dear. He sat down and the weariness of his guts took the form of tormented impatience. The image of that drab with the unearthly grace, walking beside the tainted lake, gradually filled his mind. He had learned to con his instincts and use them in a controlled and steady manner. This image was too violent to be ignored, but it was also too comprehensive to be trusted. Sitting there, his greatness weighed like a megrim, but his garrison-trained, chance-taking spirit fluttered in an anguish of excitement to the shores of the lake. How tender, and how bold, had been that glance from among the ruins! How inviting was that native grace, so foreign to him, yet inviting the young man in him, the lieutenant! He had power now. Every moment of every day he exercised power, often surprised and always gratified with himself. 'I am ready to go now. Expect me back when you see me: and send a message to my wife.'

'Shall we cancel the reception at the burgomaster's, sir?'

'And the conference on fuel?'

'What about that opening ceremony which your wife . . .'

'The party at the Count's?'

He did not know what to say. His mind was not attuned to situation such as this. His every whim was their law—they joked about that. This, though, really was a whim, the first whim he had ever experienced. He gave them a smile, the smile they dreaded most in his repertoire, and he said nothing.

Driving across the mountains made a delicious hollow sigh to lie at the pit of his stomach. He glanced at himself in the living-mirror and observed that he looked better than he did in his most eloquent official pictures. He had been brave as a young man, but this recklessness was more exciting than any of those moments which had won him decorations. Had he not used his power at last? Had he not out-soared his responsibilities? He began to sing the national anthem of his country, for he knew no other music.

He saw the lake through a mountain haze: then he plunged down past dark green woods. The winding road was still littered and pot-holed by the warfare which had swept over those ranges. The cool smell of the woods gave way from time to time to the stale smell of retreat, of dead men and horses. But that only reminded him of the perfumed stench of his triumphs as he sped downward towards the fulfilment of his unique whim.

He came out by the churned-up cemetery and, as he slowed the vehicle, the dust hung in the air. The keenness of his adventure stimulated him, so that he fancied for a moment that he heard music. There was but the one road to the shore and ('memorising the landscape at a glance'), he took it, renewing his rendering of the national anthem, and planning how swift and easy would be his approach to that drab with the unearthly grace. His professional satisfaction noticed that

somebody had been cleaning the place up; but it was a setback to his heightened consciousness to see, on turning a corner, a whole street wearing banners bearing his wife's name.

Then the music became really perceptible and the anthem dried upon his lips. He entered the square in front of the little quay where the white steamer lay on her side. A festival was in progress. Crowds of excited people fell away on either side of his vehicle, revealing a dais, gaily beflagged and containing his wife, seated upon a throne, next to a vacant throne with his own name displayed above it.

'Why, darling, how nice of you to make it! And to drive over informally just as I hardly dared to suggest! I guessed you had some clever scheme when I telephoned and they told me you had gone off alone. . . . Yes, I've reorganised the whole community. It's been a volunteer effort, of course. By the way, dear, just have a word with the Press in a minute.'

His favourite scent enveloped him. The sun shone. He sat dazed during the speeches, acknowledged the cheers and made one of his famous terse pronouncements—'It looks all right to me.'

As the applause died down, his wife nudged him and said: 'This is to be the culminating point of the simple country festival of thankfulness. I told the Press photographers to get their picture of you at this point and to leave you alone the rest of the time.' She smiled and eased his uniform, where the decorations were meeting the new developments of fat, with the slightest tug. From the shore of the lake, a procession approached in national costume and automatically he took the salute upon the dais. He was not looking at the procession for, inside himself, he was quenched, dried up with the small disappointed anger of a lieutenant. He was not looking at the grateful faces of the people whose very existence had been salvaged by the good offices of his wife. He just smiled and

kept on saying: 'It looks all right to me,' until, suddenly, the central figure representing The Spirit Of The Lake arrived opposite him with the utmost acclamation. It had been well organised by his wife and by volunteer ladies. It was but a step from the high cart upon which the figure was enthroned to the dais upon which he himself was enthroned. The figure had been lent remarkable robes, to represent the colours of all the important nations, for the occasion. Her graciousness and her majesty seemed to quell the enthusiasm of the people. With native grace so foreign to him, yet inviting, the drab uprose from her throne, her glance tender and bold as she stepped upon the dais. His wife, ever thoughtful, had equipped her with perfume for the ceremony. With every camera trained upon them, and with his favourite perfume enveloping him and with his very life pinioned between two bold and tender lips, he suffered himself to be kissed by The Spirit Of The Lake.

HE dived indoors, tumbling away from the explosion, and slid instinctively to the front of the house where there was a gap. He listened to the singing in his ears, then he threw the grenade, ducking beneath the smashed green ledge. He gasped, breathing back dust-blast and death's own taste from the street.

He had a clear idea of the street and the run of the fighting. He took in the house in the terms of cover, surprise, deflection. It might be mined, but that was the risk he had to take. There was no time to find out. He listened to the singing in his ears. The intimate raddled smell of death lingered. As a rule it did not bother him. A soldier was not to be bothered by such things. It was to be endured like oil-smell or sweat-smell. He had been sensible with himself from the first, to be whole-hearted, red-blooded, tough, to acquire all the virtues demanded, but to keep some sort of integrity by knowing that the virtues were a part of the uniform, a smart outfit, glamour boy. He listened to the singing in his ears and judged that he would have to wait. The street was hot, too hot until the signal which would consolidate the attack. The lads were all round him: Lucius across the street, Adam and Toll using the roof in the side street. It would be the Sergeant blinding away in the thick of it and the Captain, bland and cat-like, manœuvring himself into position for the signal. 'Always relax,' the Captain had said, smiling softly with his eyes. 'Body so balanced it just rests: head alert, wide as a room with windows open.' Of hearts the Captain never spoke, and the team of men who listened to him with the devotion of stroked animals was exactly divided, over drinks afterwards,



upon that issue—whether the Captain had a heart behind the soft command of his eyes or whether he had pressed the essence away, like he did sand, between the iron of his thumb and finger. ‘Always relax.’ Lie hidden and alert, empty and beautifully spring-coiled, wind-clear and observant. . . . The lads were all round. Lucius for a split second had winked like he usually winked when he gurgled in action: ‘Here she comes, a proper old bitch, boys!’ He was good to be near because of these gurgled commentaries. Of Adam and Toll, the inseparables, there was no sign. They worked together like a man’s left and right hand. If their job was the roofs in the side street, you could be sure that you would not see them until afterwards, and there would be the search for Toll’s lucky charm which always went with them and always was placed for safety in some remote part of themselves or their equipment.

The Sergeant certainly was drawing the fire, and putting up most of the noise. With him it was a part of routine, a regimental exercise which would one day become material for curt, savage discourses to recruits.

So there they all were in the street of the strange town: and the action was their accord. His diving into the house and present possession of the gap were but a part of their own manœuvre, freely executed, within the limits of the pattern. Now battle numbed the afternoon. Puffs and volleys of dust uprose yellow against the smoke of fires. He listened to the singing in his ears. Death’s taste had brought thirst: he swallowed a gritty bile. He began swallowing rhythmically. ‘Always relax.’ The symmetry of the team which the Captain had built was welded by easy discipline, by vivid stimulus of body and mind within exact limits. Given the body and mind, it was not difficult to serve within limits, to share action, to give easily, and to close the ranks cryptically honouring the man dead, neighbour, blanket-fellow, not-me-

this-time. Together by the discipline they were insulated against fear: that was the main thing.

In his gap, feeling the tension of the empty street, he did not suffer the panic fear of oneness, solitariness. The lads were all round, and each of them trained to think and act together and alone. That capacity had sustained them throughout the campaign. Only the present was real.

But with the singing in his ears and the sour death taste, he was drifting out of that good present, that needful relaxation, that team and company and time. It was certainly not loneliness, but it would help so much for one of them to whisper or call out 'Martin'. His own name upon anybody's lips would secure the present amid the noise tearing at his body's nerves. There was a scuffle and a sudden row in the empty street. Somebody had broken cover and three quick bursts made the house tremble. He ducked behind the gap and automatically paused before coming back cautiously. In a red smear of his own body, puddling the dust, lay the Sergeant. In the street was only the tinkle of dropping glass for a few seconds. Looking straight at the gap, the Sergeant's eyes lived for those few seconds in his spoiled face and what might be his mouth shaped the word 'Martin'.

Otherwise Sergeant was dead. The ranks closed. Martin listened to the singing in his ears, and, feeling that time must be short till the signal, examined the room. He had assessed it all when he dived in, instinctively noting its prospects of hostility, danger and cover. He examined it this time as a part of a home, fitting together the tatter of brocade curtains, the glossy wall-paper, the cracked mirror, jaunty and still elegant above the sagging hole where a trap-door hung down to a shallow cellar. A set of furniture, solid but tasteful according to the manner of the country, had been put to menial use by the enemy during their occupation. The room, nevertheless, frightened out of its homeliness and desolation by a dozen

careless barrack-room usages, had been cared for, and there lingered a gauche primness which might have been mistaken for dignity. Item by item, Martin fell to comparing it with a room in his own country. A mirror with a freckle of must in one corner. Curtains, light and frothy with lace, floating in a sea breeze. Floorboards which kept the fragrance of wood and sighed to the tread. Tables and chairs which were not matched one with the other, but which had acquired a harmony through long association. So, for the first time, Martin crept away from the present: and the Sergeant's eyes in the empty, angry street went sullen and dead. Martin's body did not relax. Noise intensified. Dust and smoke lowered sallowly over the house. Puffs of hot blast tore between them. The killing went on and soon there would be the signal and the killing would be intense. It was a time of poise: to the veteran—and they were all veterans—the expectancy was a controlled intemperance near to happiness. Such was the fear of tried and brave men.

At that moment, with the assurance of a diver who first looks over the heads of the spectators to admire the sun upon distant hills, Martin looked back again at the room. But in the tilted mirror he looked straight into the eyes of a young girl.

Everybody was an enemy during an action in that campaign. He was justified in being afraid of something in the back. He had cause to fear even people's faces, for the propaganda of both sides played much upon people. The Captain had warned them. He had said: 'You will find it under a bodice and it will wither you like cross-fire, unless you are armed. Go always armed—and I mean to bed too.' His eyes had smiled softly: you were smiling back almost against your will.

Martin looked at the eyes in the mirror and was not afraid. Nor was there fear in the eyes of the girl. She was looking at

him without emotion, with a fixed calm as if she had always known him and always known that he would be there. It was useless to try to speak. It was impossible to make any sign of greeting. Martin knew enough of the language of the country to be able to talk at his ease with anybody, and he had had no difficulty in interrogating some traitors before they were executed, which had made the Sergeant disproportionately proud. The lack of fear, of friendliness, or of enmity, but not of understanding, in the young face, shocked him. Suddenly, without thinking, he slid across to the trap-door beneath the tilted mirror.

She was kneeling upon a mattress in the shallow basement of the house. There was somebody behind her upon the mattress. Like all those civilians who had not fled, they were living hidden lives, peering and craning amid the suffocation of their own world falling about them. That the modest street should be an objective, that the township should be an interesting tactical problem, that the smashing of the simple order of things should be of value to foreigners, was beyond their comprehension. They had suffered a succession of wars: and still they cowered or fled and lost many men and not a few women.

The face of the girl was sallow and such natural colouring as she had was coppery in the stricken light. Martin put down his left hand to her: but she looked back at him and made no attempt to move. 'Do not fear,' Martin shouted, precisely framing the foreign language.

She did not hear. Slowly she sat back on her haunches. That gesture, so simple and yet so urbane, was good to look at. It was the sort of thing, casually noticed, which made men talk about women—and then they would talk a bawdy tenderness for hours. The girl in her attitude, negligent as a good cat, looked good: and women in this campaign were few and far between. She gave no invitation, far from it. She

just stressed the dear, cherished, physical need: and Martin, the good trooper, was armed for that, trained—not specifically but in the emphasis of duty—for such an encounter. He smiled as the weary desire in the pit of his stomach uprose and he automatically stifled it, glancing this way and that in the crescendo of din. The girl, drawn back on her haunches, gave no smile, and there, in the brittle moment of inaction, the affair would have ended, but for the older woman who came and placed her hands on the shoulders of the girl as if to withdraw her to some pretence of greater security. This older woman smiled: and Martin, poised for a moment upon the edge like a man shot through, heard the singing loud in his ears. Because of the smile of this other woman, knowing and strong, rich and articulate, not because of her body, half hidden in the darkness of the cellar, he spun round once in a desolation of loneliness and panic-fear, then leapt down upon a corner of the mattress.

‘Do not be afraid,’ he shouted, sinking to his knees, his face close to the pale coppery girl, his voice seeking the other.

‘I am not afraid. There is too much to be afraid of. There is always something . . .’

‘What?’ He inclined his head to her now.

‘I said there is always something to be afraid of, either more or less.’

The older woman shifted one hand and touched the side of his face where he had not shaved: and, inside, his strained active manhood melted.

‘Take your hands off me,’ he bawled.

But he did not move knee or hand or head: and the pale girl dispassionately gazed at him as tears and the tremor of shock blurred his eyes. She was between him, her beauty marble-bold, like an altar rail in a devastated chancel, between him and the other woman who had spoken. He reached for

the hand that touched his face and, with the wooden tenderness of one long unused to caress, held it.

The signal was given. The houses trembled as the angry street filled and the Sergeant's body became a smear beneath the traffic of the advance. The girl seemed to whimper as the lashes of noise cut through the cellar. Martin fell forward into oblivion, his cheek against a coarse texture of cloth, his right ear against the living warmth of the breast of the woman he had not yet seen in his heart. 'I have thirst,' he repeated over and over again in the precise language of that country. Nobody could have heard him. Then the tension of his thought relaxed, and his body, conning the woman, was at rest.

Sooner or later she pushed him roughly aside. 'If it is drink you need,' she said, 'we shall give it to you. Then you must be gone or I shall have all your rabble here after you. This girl will give you drink.'

She said this close to his ear, and he heard her as if it were his own voice speaking against the dense numbing roar which passed in the street. 'The girl is better where she is. My thirst is not important: but I do not wish to go either. I think I am afraid to go.' Martin spoke calmly, but the sound to him was the dizzy height and distance which the diver, having lost his poise, for once sees yawning before him. 'I think I am afraid to go. I saw the Sergeant killed. Not that death . . .'

'Death is everywhere. Death and fear. They are bred in us; and like love, they flare up.' Very close she spoke, holding his head both to her and away from her with her strength. 'Like the others, you are afraid of being afraid. That is soldier's talk. I have listened to it. . . .'

The building winced and it must have been the climax of that action. But it seemed that the building might fall in, and the woman swiftly rose up and lifted the trap-door. 'Bring the prop,' she yelled. The girl, with amazing agility,

dragged up the heavy prop and there was darkness as they sealed the cellar with it. Martin cowered down upon the mattress then in weakness. He had surrendered too much too easily. It was like death.

'Come near,' he shouted. 'I shall not hurt you. Come near.'

There was a candle flicker and they came one on each side of him. The girl motionless in the small light, unspeaking, unsmiling: the other, in the shadow, with her smile. An explosive silence succeeded the noise. The woman said: 'My name is Anna. It does not matter about this young girl. She will tell you her name if she chooses. My full name, my status, my position are of no consequence. We can ignore them. This was my house. For many lifetimes it has been in use. In my lifetime it is being ill-used. The pride I took in it . . . but that is no more than a cut in one's finger. I realise that. Are you listening, soldier? I talk because I have need to talk. For some such reason probably you will listen. This is my home and this my country. You who fight ignobly for noble causes—or those causes you must think are just—fight over me. My life is under the harrows of your actions. I am talking too much. I have still the courage to talk: and that is more than you have, soldier. . . .'

'My name is Martin.'

'Good. A straight name which might belong to any country. I need know no more.'

'You won't hear any more.'

'You are still fretful, anxious.'

'I have cause to be. Look what I am doing, cowering in a cellar with a couple of . . .'

'Call us natives. To our faces at least. Yes, you live by a rule of conduct and you have broken it. Now you are with us, where there are no rules but your conscience, no conduct but that caused by events, by force. Now tell me about your own country.'

Martin lay back upon the mattress and sighed, as men sigh who are wounded and helpless and who yet feel no pain. In the small tremor of light they crouched at each side of him; and to hear the one who spoke, he inclined his left ear. Consequently his eyes were always towards the pale girl who said nothing and seemed unaware of the almost primitive rhythm of the speech in the language at once so strange to his thought and so easy upon his tongue.

'My country is cold and light, Anna. It is open to the four winds. When the east wind prevails, it is fine. It is a cold hand caressing your bones. When the wind is from the west, you can smell leaves and grass and in the end rain comes. The south wind blows on hot days, firm and gentle, never more than brushing the standing wheat.'

'And the north wind?'

'I have no words for it. It blows across the marshes and the great sour lands of our estuary.'

There was another pause.

'Are there no cities in your country, then?'

'I am country-bred,' Martin said. 'But my living was in one of our cities, a city which when I first saw it seemed to me to be climbing into the sky. Much of it was built with glass and girdered steel.'

'You talk like a technician.'

'But that does not mean that one lacks heart. Sensibility we used to call it. Well, in my country I lived in the city, though my roots were in the lands of my own home. When the wild geese flew honking across the city park or our river beneath the city bridges, I used to feel a moment of tenderness like love in recollection and of bitterness like love . . .'

Then the candle went out and darkness heavy with war blanketed him as he lay upon his back, while they moved to go for another candle, and Anna's voice said: 'What do you know about love, Martin?' He lay still and stretched, con-



sidering the tone of that voice. There might be a smile in the words but no invitation. Nor was there bitterness so much as a kind of sorrow. In silence he heard himself breathe and began to hold his breath. The woman's voice had softness in it—that understanding which had made him talk about his own country. He reached out into the darkness towards that softness. Errant and happy, he pursued the rich senses which the darkness cradled.

His satisfaction was timeless, like a moment of action, neither short nor long, unwearied, because of the simple singleness of body and mind. Then he seemed to be dreaming, and he shivered, wishing to throw off the dream. Awake, he felt good until anxiety was flowing back. 'Bring the candle,' he ordered loudly, startled by his own voice. He strained his eye for the light, his left hand still touching with unconscious tenderness the breast of the woman at his side. 'Why doesn't she bring another light?' he said quietly, petulantly bending down again towards the head upon the mattress. The light came slowly, from the other end of the cellar away from the trap-door. It was not the young girl who carried it.

The woman Anna carried it, illuminating within its cestus her smile. As Martin started up from the mattress and looked fearfully down at the girl there, Anna said: 'I left you because you were happy. It is now night and men are moving about coming back into the houses, looking for the dead.'

Martin gazed at the cold pallor of the girl sleeping. Then he shuddered and looked back into Anna's smiling face. 'I had better go,' he said, in a voice thin with cold or fear. But Anna had touched him.

'No; you have been happy and you are safe with us.'

'Safe? I am not afraid.'

'They are your own people. There is nothing to fear. You can go and show yourself. But don't go. You will be safer here.'

The tenderness renewed its benison. He sighed, yielding to a calm within the eye of the dark.

His own people in possession. That meant they had won again. After the signal, it had gone according to plan, and probably the Captain had called them together as soon as they were relieved and, ignoring the losses, had spoken and smiled. The men would glance quickly from one to the other, closing the ranks, and very soon they would be warm in one another's company. Before the Captain had finished they would be like stroked animals, devoted, ready, albeit utterly weary. Martin suddenly yearned for that company, for Toll with his lucky charm and Adam his shadow, for Lucius, vehement and attentive, for Forn, called the shepherd, and for the Captain. Yes, a violent loyalty seized him at the thought of the Captain who would be concealing the loss of that old regimental sergeant behind the smiling of his eyes. Then they would break up and the cursing would begin. They would curse with eloquence at each other, at the Captain, at the climate, at the war. They would write letters and, full of thoughts of home, they would look around for drinks and amusement. . . .

Suddenly Martin heard steps overhead. Men were clumping in through the gap where he had waited. They followed each other across the floor, but where they came near the trap-door they were curiously muffled. 'That is where the hay is,' whispered Anna. 'We had it there once before to cover the trap-door.'

But Martin held his breath. He was hiding from his mates. He was concealing his loss of heart or cowardice, or whatever it was had held him back from the action and cast him into the arms of these women. Had he gone out before she lay down on the straw, it would have been easy to face them, to ask for his own unit and perhaps to come clean to his friends or at least to lie effectively about being found out. It would be

impossible now to emerge in the midst of their bedding of hay.

He felt cold, betrayed by the women: and he began to fear his own mates as he once feared the police as a youngster when he first went to the city. 'Now we must be still until they settle,' Anna said. 'They will soon move on.'

'But I am one of them,' Martin whispered.

'You are one of us too. You are part of the life that must go on even with the killing. You are fighting for noble causes—so they say. You say you are fighting for life. Martin, we here are life. Stay with us for a while. You are safe.'

'I am not looking for safety.'

'Nor for love?'

'Nor for love,' he growled, stretching upon the mattress, while they clumped to and fro above his head. Anna brought out food and they ate in the light of a shaded candle. Then Anna lifted a curtain at the far end of the cellar, smiled, and he heard the sound of movements grow less: voices were becoming distinct. Suddenly he recognised the voice of Forn saying: 'Who's for the hay?' He had feared this most of all. He had feared his own mates and here they were. He shook the girl and said: 'Is there any other way out?'

She looked back at him, sucking his question into her great eyes. If he had woken her she was not angry. There was no smile, no fear, no understanding. He touched her shoulder again, but tenderly, to make up for his roughness. She made no answer. He glanced at the curtain which had fallen behind Anna and crawled towards it. He raised it and put out his head into darkness flavoured with the freshness of the outer air: but before he could move Anna whispered from just above him. 'Go back, please, or you will bring trouble to all of us.' The next moment she was beside him, pulling back the curtain.

He said: 'But this is another way out, Anna.'

'It leads to the back. You come out near the shrine in the alley. Nobody knows it.'

'Then I am going.'

Her face came very close to him in the dark. 'Then go with my blessing. I had hoped that just for one night . . .'

She was in his arms. He could not see her, but the weight of her body lay across his knee. He felt her smile, her knowing smile that took his manhood. But he could not see her and the image that formed in the dark was that of the pale girl. The breasts, the limbs, the belly's curve beneath the dress belonged to her. 'O Anna! Is it you, Anna?' There was silence; and afterwards he sighed and went back to the candle and the voices of his comrades.

Forn said: 'The hay's good and fresh——' Then he stopped abruptly and said: 'Martin: he liked fresh hay for a bed.'

Lucius said: 'Leave Martin out.'

'Why, Lucius, why leave Martin out?'

'Because,' said Lucius, 'you heard what the Captain said.'

'—— the Captain!' said Forn.

'All right! —— the Captain. It won't make it no easier to talk about Martin. Martin's out. Nobody knows how, when, or why. Sergeant. We saw what's left of Sergeant. What's the good of you talking about Martin?'

'Martin was a country boy. That's all.' Forn's voice retained the country speech. Martin crept up close to the trap-door. Forn's head, its broth of yellow-white hair, its eyes a bleached blue and all the sun of twenty-two summers in the floss of the skin, must be close, laid upon the thickness of hay.

'Martin's a country boy. Nonsense,' Lucius said, in spite of himself. 'I knew Martin and, believe me, Martin knew the city. As far as I know, he never went near the country.'

'You're wrong, Lucius. Martin was born at the last village before the lighthouse in the estuary. He told me about it. I suppose because I come from that part of the country.'

'Well, I shouldn't have thought of Martin . . .'

'Listen, Lucius. His father came back from the sea and got married late and settled on a farm. And there they had the sheep grazing down on the marshes. There were creeks. The sailing barges passed close in at high tide, but the big ships, of course, used the channel out in the centre of the tideway. The channel was marked with buoys. Martin was given a prize by his dad when he could sail a boat straight out to the nearest buoy and back. We have wonderful birds in that estuary country, besides the duck, and snipe and wild geese. Martin knew all their names. He and I were only talking about them two nights ago in the rest billet. Then most of us had sailing boats and there were the sailing matches in the summer . . .'

Forn shifted comfortably in the hay: Martin heard him, and closed his eyes.

'Shut up about Martin!'

'Stuff it, Forn. The Captain says . . .'

'— the Captain!'

They cursed. The hay creaked. Martin, beneath, crawled intent and abject towards Forn, where he lay. Their voices were silent suddenly. But in the faintest rustle of the hay by the head of Forn there were sobs. The sound of them erected props and girders and Martin's prison was contained within them in a great fear. He lay face downwards and accepted the death smell in his own body. Forn and Lucius, the Captain and the rest of them, were still living, 'It's Martin. Martin here!' he whispered, he said, he shouted. 'It's Martin here!' The stuffy darkness contained his voice. The men above turned in their exhausted sleep. Forn no longer sobbed. There was silence. He was deserted. He could not share their sleep. Their indifference was the trap-door covering him. 'This is Martin!'

Her head, her forearm, her shoulder, her breast, like

anæsthetic, buffeted him with soft cushions into silence. 'Let them alone. They're not worrying about you. They think you're dead. It's each for himself really, whichever side it is. I've seen it all. Besides, if they find you here now, your officer will want to ask questions: and for us there will be no protection. Only you can protect us. . . .'

She spoke with words and with her body. But in the midst of that voluptuous logic, the very fulfilment of happiness, Martin focused the Captain, his eyes soft and merry, his voice hardening with question after question. Martin trembled before the Captain. He gripped this woman in the voluptuous shadows, his fear convulsive. She stroked his forehead. 'You are a sensible one. You have forgotten women, but that is all. Though you say you come from a gentle flat country, you have forgotten gentleness.'

Silence was a long-drawn sigh on that wrecked place, where the men fondled their past and caressed their future in alert, battle-weary sleep, but where Martin sank into his great treachery, the present, like a dead man transfixed by time, like a man deserted by custom, by duty, by companions. Like a deserter, Martin sneaked between waking and sleeping, the pale girl in his eyes, the woman Anna close to him.

The counter-attack came earlier than had been expected, before dawn. The men stumbled into action with few words, trained, cunning amid the confusion. 'I want my boots,' Martin said.

But the pale girl, sculptured in terror, smiled back palely across the candle. How rare and supple was the shape of her against the crashing dark. Martin knelt, casting about with his hand. 'Give me my boots, you . . .' He shook Anna, and shrill laughter rattled out of her.

'I took them while you slept.'

'But where?'

'I gave them to a soldier, outside, when I went out by the secret way.'

Martin aimed a blow at her with the flat of his hand. She ducked calmly, but the pale girl suddenly sprang over and crouched between them. In their movements they acted like the mind and the body of one person. The noise and the falling dust and the guttering candle blurred them: and fears leapt at him from every corner of the cellar. 'But the enemy! They'll be in here in a minute with their counter-attack,' he cried, suddenly beseeching them, pleading with their ties.

'They were here before. We have no reason to fear them. They are soldiers as you are.'

Then the noise moved away and for long, helpless minutes Martin knew that the enemy must come. Instinct first, and then training, warned him of these women. He watched them now as the noise of the battle receded. He reached out and fingered his three grenades. Anna made no attempt to interfere with him. There was no sign of exultation or of satisfaction that the enemy were coming back. The women watched him.

In spite of himself, he reached out and touched Anna; and she smiled. Was he afraid now even of that smile? Would she go on betraying him: and the girl, staring, her eyes wide with terror and beauty which knew neither friend nor foe, neither love nor hatred? He heard men coming in then, cautious as he himself had been upon the floor above. The women were motionless: and Martin could read no betrayal in their eyes. Foreign voices spoke quickly, a relieved chatter following the violence of counter-attack, triumphant voices. Martin had been fighting that campaign long enough to know most of what they said, how they recognised the smashed houses and referred in a bawdy way about women being there. As they trampled the hay, his weaknesses of fear slipped away from him. Automatically he stowed the three grenades at

the ready and cocked his weapon. Automatically he watched the two of them as men must watch every chance in war. The enemy thudded across to the place where Forn had slept: but they were not there to sleep. They were hoping for consolidation with the daylight. The battle swung to and fro.

Happiness suddenly burst through the tension (and was it sun upon fresh paint and gorse across salt water?) The tenderness dried upon his skin like sweat in the sudden glare of noon. Anna, sensing immediately that brightness in his mind, that hard glint of courage in his eyes, threw herself forward upon him. 'Spare us, Martin. You make me afraid. You have been safe here: and we have been kind. . . .' She felt good against him, but her hot tears scalded and he was wary, watching the pale girl, the other one. 'You talked of your own flat country and your beautiful city of glass and steel,' whispered Anna. 'We are part of that, your home, wherever there is love. Come, lie down, Martin.'

She tried to bear him down to the mattress; but there was no longer any safety, and even as he resisted her she saw that the pale girl had backed towards the curtain. He shook himself and plunged after her, as she vanished in a streak of terror. There was a singing in his ears. Fear of betrayal, awareness of danger, fumbled in his limbs. Grey light and the tang of death-dusty air came suddenly. He was outside, clear of Anna, of the dark, but the pale girl had sped into the haze of chattering, retching cross-fire.

Then he saw the enemy where she had gone. Through the tilted gaps of walls across from the shrine he saw them and he was a soldier who had seen *them* fifteen seconds before they had seen him.

The citation for valour, which was read in a thousand homes in the estuary, and broadcast on the radio in the fine steel and glass city, told the world what Martin did with his three grenades in turning that counter-attack. The Captain



had sat by Martin near the shrine where he lay exhausted and, looking at him with soft eyes, said: 'Relax, while I find you some boots. We had begun to think you had passed out. . . .' The sun was high and Martin blinked like a stroked animal.

The next day the Captain had written the citation for the decoration which established Martin as a hero.

## THE CREDITORS CALL

PRIN died without grandeur in the small room behind the State Bedchamber. His teeth stood in a glass beside him; his underclothes, not very clean, were rumpled in a heap beneath the iron bed-end. The housekeeper, the members of the household and the secretariat were embarrassed by the room as they crowded in and out. Each, departing, thought about a personal future, shocked that a job could, overnight, come to an end.

Then the old woman, from the room above the stables, came in and spoke with sudden fierce authority over the body of Prin. She said: 'Light candles and sweep this room. Arrange for the undertakers tomorrow: but let the lawyers come immediately. When they are finished, come to me. I shall be at the shrine.' That was the damp shrine by the wall beneath the stables where the exhaust from Prin's big motor-cars blenched the ivy and the flowers offered by the maidservants in jam-jars. The old woman knelt there in the courtyard, in full view from the windows of the mansion, and of the mansions upon either side where there were always onlookers because of the fame of Prin.

Old and grand as these mansions were, there were few who could remember them over the years. Nobody, for example, could contradict one of the under-chauffeurs who said that the shrine was not ancient, but actually commemorated somebody shot against the yard wall a couple of decades ago. Next door but two, he said, in the courtyard of the maternity home, there were marks of machine-gunning and the tasteful rockery was in fact a mass grave. Nobody contradicted him because the events even of a single decade were an effort to recall: everything before that seemed completely irrelevant.

There must have been servants at the backs of these great houses when the ivies were young and the grottoes were being built, but they had left no trace of their service beyond initials scrawled here and there and that great bloated lover's heart, carved in the green stone, by the yard tap. Nobody, indeed, knew when or how the old woman came to live above the stable: and they obeyed her authority in these details attending the death of Prin simply because of her age, and the intensity of her expression, and, of course, because somebody had to make a first move, even after the death of a man like Prin.

It was not until the consultation between the lawyers and the secretariat had finished that it became known that the woman was Prin's wife; and that it had been his command that she should attend to the disposal of his body and of his estate. When she returned to the house from the shrine she left them in no doubt of this. She said: 'I expect certain visitors. Bring to me everyone who calls about this death. I shall transact all business in the State Bedchamber. Let everyone remain at his post if any reward is desired for serving Prin.' Then, when the candles in the small room were lit, she did no more praying, but sat herself down in the State Bedchamber, waiting—alert, motionless, the last letter of Prin beneath one scrawny wrist—for visitors to come.

It was a shrunken ageless fellow from the mountains who came in the grey of the morning, lost in his black civilian clothes, curiously stiff and unused, no doubt unworn throughout the long troubles of that country. He beat upon the door and startled the guards out of their wits, recalling the days when police, and such, used summonses as robust and unsubtle.

'Prin is dead,' he said lightly, 'and I have come.'

The guards felt the chill of the morning (the one who ran away soon after vowed that it was more than morning's

chill). They stood in the doorway with sombre faces proper to a house of the dead. 'It will be some hours before the secretariat will be at work. You'd better come back.'

'Oh no. Not me,' laughed the wan mountainy man, his bold, rock-grey eyes measuring them and their weapons and one of his great nailed boots within the threshold. 'I don't care about the secretariat now that Prin is dead. I am coming in.'

'But your name?'

The guards were leaning on the door, and one of them was glancing back for the alarm bell when he caught sight of the weeds of the old woman upon the scarlet staircase.

'Let him come in at once,' she snarled. 'I said that all visitors were to come to me.' Her thin voice carried strongly and the visitor, pushing the guards aside, glanced upward without any special gesture of recognition as if already familiar with the strange appearance of such an old woman upon such stairs. Then, as she turned into the State Bedchamber, he mounted the stairs two at a time and passed out of sight just behind her.

There was some argument when the guards reported this visitor to the housekeeper, who immediately aroused most of the secretariat. In the course of time, quite a concourse gathered in the grand foyer upstairs wondering whether to knock upon the door of the State Bedchamber to discover if the old woman needed help, for the mountainy people could be violent, more especially in the Capital. The head chauffeur, in particular, who had for some years kept up a nodding acquaintance with the old woman—even though it had only been an elementary precaution not to become intimate with neighbours—was for entering the room without more ado lest the corpse itself should have been robbed.

Their confusion was silenced by the appearance of another stranger at the main doors. This weedy townsman spoke with the voice of a professional man, of the sort common in those

times in most great cities, who had come down in the world either through the march of events or some personal incompatibility. In those refined bourgeois accents, which could not fail to raise a smile among the guards even in their anxiety, this insignificant, elderly person said: 'Prin is dead: and I have come.'

Everybody's instinct, of course, was not to admit such a visitor. Nevertheless, remembering the orders and relieved at the same time to have an excuse for the opening of the upstairs doors, they motioned him with one accord to mount the stairs, crowding with him a little unceremoniously into the grand foyer. There the housekeeper, the major-domo and the chief of the secretariat, drawn like a screen across the gilded doors, were on the point of deciding which of them should announce the newcomer when the doors were flung open, and out strode the mountainy man—with the gait of a god. The noon light reflected, sparkling in the cut glass and mirrors behind him in the State Bedchamber, sheathed him with fierce brightness. Those who could remember the mountain people before they were crushed and thinned out recognised that gait and that fierce brightness. Yet they were amazed at the ease of the fellow and the way he seemed to laugh with his body as he paused in front of the shabby visitor who, hat in hand, was being escorted to the door.

'Greetings, brother, now Prin is dead!' he barked in his thick brogue. 'He owed me my body: but you are also a great creditor.'

'Greetings, now Prin is dead. But there is a greater creditor than I.' The man sighed. 'For he took love also. . . .'

As the one strode on down the scarlet stairs, the other was seen to be ushered in by the old woman herself. Hardly were the front doors shut upon the fierce one with his laughing body and formidable gait, than there was discreet uproar among the more senior members of the household and the

secretariat. They were highly trained for Prin's service and secured even at his death by their contracts, but all were now perturbed by the careless yet somehow esoteric conversation they had witnessed, by the cessation of all routine and by the approaching necessity of issuing public *communiqués*. The guards who had been on duty in the morning were sent for; their account of the first visitor having been so misleading.

But only one of them could be found. The other had packed his belongings and walked out through the garden, only pausing to offer a prayer at the shrine to ward off evil. The remaining guard stuck to his story about the shrunken figure, the wan mountainy man with his rock-grey eyes and great nailed boots. Obviously they must have been drinking to fortify their nerves in the small hours with Prin lying dead and the old woman wide as a ghost haunting the chambers. The one man had taken fright and had bundled away to his own village in the plains: the other was not sufficiently reliable, in the view of the secretariat, to remain another hour in service. When the major-domo dismissed him, he too asked permission to kneel before the shrine: and it was those detailed to show him off who later began the rumour that the shrine had a reek about it of fresh death.

It was early in the evening that the doors of the State Bed-chamber opened again. The professional gentleman with the poise of a statesman and the assurance of a savant came forth. 'As an important creditor, gentlemen, I wish to give you my assurance that your services are being honoured and that a suitable directive will reach you for the public *communiqué*. Prin, who owed me thought and understanding, had already made provisions for such an event as this—in every detail except those concerned with the heart, of course.' He waved them aside with an air of indulgent pomposity and they bowed him down the grand staircase in spite of themselves. As he left, he turned to the major-domo and said: 'Ah yes,

by the way, you are to have the big long-distance travelling car standing by in the mews. The mistress said so.'

The bare announcement of Prin's death was made on the radio that evening: and the whole secretariat was in consultation in the grand foyer when the doors of the State Bedchamber opened as unexpectedly as before.

A woman of mature and compelling beauty stepped quickly into the brilliant lights of the mirrors and chandeliers. 'Love is paid,' she said with the thin strong voice of the old woman, Prin's wife. 'The estate is settled. You may all go: and leave the rest to the undertakers.'

She moved with a sombre majesty, for all those brilliant white draperies, such as some could remember being sold as grave-clothes in former times when such things were permitted. At the foot of the stairs she turned and made for the courtyard doors before even the doorkeeper who opened them could reach for the lights which served the path across to the stables where the great car was, of course, waiting with its engine running.

When the major-domo, pushing the fellow aside, reached for the switches and flooded the courtyard with light, the figure which instantly had touched all their hearts had vanished. In the distance they could hear the motor engine softly attentive: they could see where the exhaust blenched the ivy by the shrine and they observed the lush fall of the illumination upon the fat fronds in the still cold night.

Within the hour many of them left, holding their noses and scurrying by the shrine where there was the fresh smell of death. The more responsible ones who remained accompanied the undertakers and embalmers through the lighted house to the empty State Bedchamber where the old woman, his wife, had held the reckoning beneath her wrist, and into the small room behind where Prin's teeth still stood in a glass. There, in a heap beneath the iron bed-end, they found his dry bones.

## A MAN STRICKEN BY SUNSETS

EVERY time I see the sun go down, I think of them. If I look at a sinking sun in a frozen sky, a sunset without warmth, edged with a pallor of green without fragrance, quivering before the threat of dire black night, on any such evening, their very presence comes back to me. I hear their voices, both of them haltingly speaking an unfamiliar language, the only tongue common to them. Even now I am puzzled how they had managed so much, each thinking separately in native idioms and yet talking, whispering, arguing, making love, by means of phrases and sentences spoken with less confidence than a first-year student, but . . .

They had no business to be there, I remind myself. Nevertheless from the first there were moments when such as I, travelling on a responsible mission, felt an obligation to them, the greater because they were so avowedly without status, so wholly, as somebody put it, human cargo.

The Steward and the First Officer were arguing about them; and the rest of us were pointing out to each other the new frontiers which are to follow the main stream of the Flux and to subdivide at the confluence where the tributary brings in a smudge of yellow turbulent water from the foothills. We were admiring the distant prospect of the mountains and the District Commissioner, always a sentimentalist, was saying how air travel was salutary to those concerned with the tasks of government. Frontiers, he was saying, disappear; and one looks across the features of a continent and sees the geographical harmony which Nature intended.

'But look at the weather ahead. This is no time to be arguing about passengers,' the First Officer said to the Steward.



'You can write them down as stowaways, or as refugees—I don't care. It's your look out. The Pilot and I are here to fly this aeroplane, not to sort out the people, whether they appear on board by stealth or with a guard of honour. If they break the rules or behave badly'—he glanced with an objective engineer's look, no more, at the woman—'the Pilot might put back or land for an unscheduled stop to get them off. But these people, whatever their nationality, are not misbehaving or breaking any flight regulation. Anyway, I don't like the look of this weather ahead. I hope it's not one of the famous electrical storms.' He went forward, preoccupied by the look of the weather which, notorious though it has always been over that part of the Flux, was deteriorating with a suddenness which was beyond all calculation. The next moment we were in the eye of that freak electrical storm which, as everyone knows from the papers, sent us fluttering down. The Pilot's feat in regaining control at the last moment when we had all lost consciousness is also well known and still to me an unexplained miracle.

I remember, as the storm struck us, seeing the Flux from several angles and the smudge of its confluence. Then I can recollect the jarring, scraping impact of the aircraft against the sand-spit. A moment later I became aware of the turbulent stream of the waters upon all sides of us, the yellow tributary and the ice-blue main stream of the Flux. Our ordeal began. We were upon a spit of sand belonging technically to no particular nation and the points of land we could see distantly in the harsh light of sunset were sometimes one country, sometimes another or another.

Our first concern was, of course, for the District Commissioner who, as the papers pointed out, was a man of really irreplaceable worth (only equalled, I should add, by the District Commissioner who has now succeeded him). Most of us had jumped clear immediately after the crash-landing and

when we had recovered our senses, we hastened back towards the open door, calling out: 'Your Excellency! Are you safe?'

The Pilot met us in the doorway. He was supporting the woman, who looked calm, almost unshaken. 'Take care of this woman,' the Pilot said. 'Keep her at a safe distance until we can be sure that there is no explosion.'

'But His Excellency?'

'I said look after this woman,' the Pilot said in a flat, terse voice, such as engineers often possess. 'Lay her down in a place of safety.'

'But we cannot leave His Excellency inside. Surely his priority alone . . .'

The Pilot spoke over his shoulder to the First Officer, apparently ignoring us. Tenderly, in strange contrast to his sharp, unfeeling manner towards us, he began to help the woman down. The First Officer then appeared in the doorway, holding a pistol quite nonchalantly as if it was a fountain-pen. He said: 'You'd better do what the Pilot tells you.'

We took the woman between us. There was no doubt now that she was pregnant: and suddenly her companion, the young man, joined us, crying out in his own language: 'Careful, please, gentlemen, she is not well.' Hopping from one foot to another, he tried to repeat his plea in the other language which they both understood: but she turned to him with a reassuring smile which went straight to our hearts because we could see the effort it caused her. 'Leave her to us,' we said to the young man: and, even as we said it, we resented the way he let us carry the whole of the burden, contenting himself merely with telling us to take care.

As we laid her down, he ran and knelt beside her, taking her head in his hands. He said with his halting over-simplified use of language: 'They have not made you more ill, dearest?' She looked from one to another of us, her dark eyes warning, penetrating, potent. Her expression told us that she had

suffered and that it was, albeit indirectly, our concern. Each of us shuffled self-consciously, trying to think of some way in which we could make a gesture of—no other word is possible—repentance. She smiled again, unself-consciously acknowledging us.

Rather sheepishly we left them together, so tender and human and helpless in the dying light. Our thoughts were for the District Commissioner and we hurried again towards the door of the aircraft, prepared to risk even the officious flourish of the First Officer's gun.

They were lifting out the Steward who apparently had been standing when we landed, and who had fractured his skull against one of the spars. 'Move him very gently, you men,' the Pilot said, ignoring alike our stations and our susceptibilities. 'The young man doesn't look likely to last, I'm afraid. Don't take him far away. As soon as we get things ship-shape on board here, we'll have him back.' The Steward opened his eyes as the Pilot said this, and as we moved him, his glances searched about anxiously. 'Take it easy,' the First Officer said, bending over him. 'You'll be better if you lie quiet.'

'Is that woman all right?' the Steward managed to gasp.

'Yes,' I said, 'she's quite safe. She's lying over there and the man is with her, looking after her.'

'Good. I was trying to fasten an extra safety-belt across her when we piled up; and I must have hit my head. Have they got everything they want now?'

'Don't worry about them.'

'But I don't want anything to happen to them. . . .' He died then, before we could cover him with a coat or comfort his last moments. We stood up and were about to turn away when the District Commissioner himself strode up and, glancing only casually at the body, asked: 'Where are the woman and the man? Have you made her comfortable? I should like to see her at once, of course.'

'The Steward is dead, Your Excellency.'

'We're very lucky not to be dead, all of us; and I shall recommend the Steward for some sort of posthumous honour. He was carrying out his duty when he received the injury. He was trying to help the woman.'

'But, Your Excellency,' said one of us, more gifted than most with an objective outlook and a realistic view of the District Commissioner's sentimentality. 'The woman has no business to be there, and it seems a tragic waste that a young man like this should have lost his life on account of . . .'

'Bah! Let us see these two people and make them as comfortable as we can. The Pilot will permit us to take shelter inside the aircraft as soon as there is no danger of fire, and I assume that somebody will rescue us.'

The white air seemed to freeze and thicken with ice as the darkness gathered over the distant land. The First Officer stated laconically that the last radio message sent out was the routine one declaring the presence of stowaways on board. The electric storm had, of course, finished the transmitter and it seemed very unlikely that it could be repaired after the further damage done in the crash-landing. A little group of us formed round the man and the woman, watching the man chafing the woman's cheeks and listening to the absurd prattle of his speech. The First Officer was looking down at the pair of them with serious intensity while he was speaking. 'As soon as the Pilot has checked the safety of the aircraft, I think you had better take this woman in,' he said, and turned on his heel.

Truth to tell, we were all beginning to feel concerned for ourselves. The spit of sand was small—the wreck of our aircraft took up about one-third of it. The waters of the two rivers rode angrily by. We told each other that there was no immediate danger of a rise in these waters: but we felt threatened as the light began to go. Each of us was also

conscious of the interruption of our several missions. Even if we were rescued immediately, which seemed unlikely, all our plans for the next few days would go awry. We could none of us afford interruptions of this kind: and when we considered the position of the District Commissioner, it was borne in on us that this accident might, in fact, have a marked effect upon international affairs.

We were comforted, however, by the thought that such an aircraft as ours being overdue would cause concentrated and vigorous action by the authorities. No doubt search-parties were already being organised. The embarrassment which concerned us immediately was the fact that such a radio message had been sent about the stowaways. The presence of people like those could not fail to implicate every one of us in some small measure and there was always a possibility that the Press might take it up.

'You can bring the woman back on board now,' the Pilot said, rather as if we were nothing more than a ground crew assembled to obey his orders.

'Careful, please, gentlemen, she's not well,' the young man cried again, again making no attempt to assist us. The First Officer had rigged up a light, and he smiled at us, rather ostentatiously fingering what was probably the pistol in his coat pocket, as we re-entered the aircraft. He laid our burden in that part of the aisle which had been cleared of wreckage and we stood by, a little uneasily, while the District Commissioner brought out his own flask and handed it to the woman and the man.

'You had better make yourselves as comfortable as you can,' the Pilot said. 'I see no hope whatever of our being rescued before daylight. We have a very little of the routine rations for our journey still left and also an emergency pack. When these people are fed, I will dole out a sufficient ration to see us through: the First Officer will make out a detail for a

watch to be kept until we are rescued. Each watch will be responsible for the signal apparatus which is to be used only if the rescuing parties are heard. If it should be necessary, we shall have a second watch to look after this woman.'

As soon as we had settled the District Commissioner with a degree of comfort not inconsistent with his rank, we formed ourselves into a sort of committee and invited the First Officer to join us. 'The time has come to regularise our position,' we said. 'This woman and this man have no right to be here. . . .'

'But they have a right to live, I suppose?' the First Officer said truculently.

'We do not deny that. We simply desire to make the position quite clear in order that we know where we are, and so that we can clear His Excellency's situation in the event of a sudden rescue. This man and this woman,' we said, 'are people presumably without papers. They belong each to their own countries and ought by rights to remain in those countries, accepting their respective régimes according to all the international agreements in which we ourselves are largely concerned.'

'That may be true,' said the First Officer. 'But the fact remains that, rightly or wrongly, they have become passengers in an aircraft for which the Pilot and I are responsible. It appears to me that they are in love with each other and that they are here because they are determined to escape from the régimes of their respective countries. I am often in love myself—he treated us to a smirk which might have been scandalous if it had not been so human—and I think I know how they feel. Anyway, I know how this woman looks. I have five of my own. Good luck to those two, that is what I say!'

During that long cold night it did not seem necessary to organise a second watch while the woman lay between sleeping and waking and the man beside her slept with the softness

and grace of a child, as if often the habit of people from his country. One or other of us, throughout the night, was always watching to see how they fared, receiving a smile from the woman, after accepting a look of warning and rebuke.

At first light we heard some of the rescue aircraft and we put up pyrotechnic signals. The whole world has seen the photographs that were taken of us soon afterwards, on that lozenge-shaped spit in the midst of the cold curdled waters. By midday we were being tortured by the wind from the mountains, our rations were giving out and the reconnaissance aircraft had flashed a signal that the water was too rough to attempt to alight near us by float-plane. We saw rivercraft put out from several points on the land and put back again without being able to approach us.

After the last attempt, in the late afternoon, the young man stood by my side and said: 'She says that her life and her other life and my life are too good—no, that is not the word—precious. She has no country and I have no country. We have no papers. But we have overcome all the hazards of hatred and terror that there are in the world. Last night she said that they will never kill our first-born. Last night was long and dark, but not longer and darker than other nights: and that is all that she said.'

I looked at the sinking sun in the frozen sky, a sunset without warmth, edged with the pallor of green without fragrance. I turned and was shocked by the infinite hope in the eyes of the young man. Then I went in with him to the woman whose very presence was a remonstrance but whose smile was absolution. During that second night, those of us not on watch stayed huddled together in a group about the man and the woman. We no longer spoke of our missions or of the finer points of treaties and frontiers or of the ethnological problem of the nations. We looked from the one to the other

of them, and repeated among ourselves the broken phrases which the young man had used.

The papers were full of the rescue and credit has been given to the airmen of one nation, the boatmen of another and the technicians of a third, each contributing in unaccustomed and dramatic harmony. The skill of the Pilot and of the First Officer, the heroism of the Steward, the calmness of the District Commissioner and, indeed, the morale of all of us, have been noted. Our rescue was, in its way, quite a credit to humanity, and as we all said during the ordeal, a stern lesson in liaison.

As soon as we had disembarked at the city downstream, we had an urgent conference to regularise the whole process, to prepare a directive for the Press, and to neutralise in some way, if possible, that unfortunate signal sent from the aircraft. Representatives of the two nations were likely to claim the woman and the man: and a pathetic babble of protest, a halting agony of phrases and sentences, spoken with less confidence than a first-year student, arose from the two of them.

We were, all of us, conscious of the illegality of the status of the couple, but we concentrated our evidence deliberately upon the international salvage problem occasioned by several nations having contributed to our rescue. But hardly had the broad outlines of this been agreed, when the Pilot, who was not entitled, strictly speaking, to be heard further, focused the attention of everybody upon himself by standing upon a platform by the window and saying: 'We have had a fortunate escape and our presence here is due to circumstances which, in spite of my long experience of flying, I would call miraculous. There were with us two people about whom it was necessary to make a signal and for whom official claims are now about to be made. These people no longer belong to this nation or to that. They belong to the larger sphere of



humanity and, as such, I and my crew regarded them as a charge.' He spoke confidently, as engineers so often speak about the forces which they control. 'They are passengers committed to us to bring to a destination. Whether that terminus represents safety or a new life is no concern of ours. But to Your Excellency and to you other gentlemen it can only be a matter of concern that that first-born be brought forth to life and not death since your lives—and mine—have been at one with that life already. I propose that you testify with me that the signal was an aberration of that unfortunate young man now dead and that all further references to the *others*, the woman and the man, be categorically omitted.'

'But, Captain,' I objected, 'this will surely not only bring His Excellency into disrepute but also spoil much of the value of his story to the Press, when these people are observed, obviously deficient in so many respects, in the company of His Excellency. I ask you to look . . .'

The crowd parted as I made my gesture, but there was no sign of the woman or the man. They were not in the room.

'You, sir,' said the Pilot, 'evidently suffer from our general illusion. I see nobody here but those officially concerned with our affairs.'

The District Commissioner laughed—I thought rather ostentatiously—and said that he was ready to receive the Press and to make his radio recording of his account of our experiences. I found myself looking for a moment into the steady eyes of the Pilot who murmured, as much to himself as to me: 'Her life and his life and that other life are too good. They are certain to overcome all the hazards of hatred and terror that there are in the world. One day their token will tell you and me that they are safe. The sun must set to rise again.'

I looked for the First Officer but he, I suppose, had slipped away while we were preoccupied with our negotiations and

with the Pilot's statement. I still feel a kind of awe for such people, in spite of their tiresome habits of direct action. I am still worried when I consider the whole sequence of events because I pride myself on being a man of integrity and common sense. Nevertheless I will confess that that token—most palpable and eloquent when I see the sun go down—is established in my heart. It is hope.



## JUDGMENT

'SEE, Krinon, I have brought you mountain cream. The most nourishing health-giving . . .'

'I am in good health, in spite of my deformity. I do not need cream for health.'

'But think of the value of cream like this. Here in the capital of the province, they tell me it's worth its weight in gold.'

'Life is of more value than gold: and I possess life. You can give your cream to some of the children, if you like. It will nourish them.'

'As you wish, Krinon. And perhaps you would like to indicate the children?'

'Go and find the children yourself. They are all the same to me.'

Krinon would slew round in his wheeled chair after such scenes of ill-tempered charity. His visitor would wince, fumbling with the gift of cream, clumsy with regrets for its cost, with bewilderment at the petulant integrity of Krinon. Outside in the street, however, the children soon settled any problem of cream. Decorously, resolutely, they begged for it: and they received the stiff golden curdles of it in the brown hot palms of their hands as if it was a birthright.

Krinon would wheel himself to his door and look over the children playing in the street, without saying a word to them. Watching the intensity of movement and vividness of repose, so characteristic of these poorest children of a province celebrated for its graces, he would become like a man dazed by the sun. The harmonies of movement and inertia flushed his being as the sun might do, or one of our better wines.

Sometimes children would help with his chair when Krinon

made his daily journeys, and he accepted such help without enthusiasm, without pleasure in the eagerness with which it was offered or in the zest with which it was accomplished. He needed the extra motive power to take his chair over the river bridge or up the slope to the cemetery: and afterwards he dismissed it with a shrug of his impatient shoulders and 'now you go off home . . .'

As a young man, Krinon had, I believe, held his own at school; but afterwards, when he was apprenticed to the cobbler, he felt the contrast between the footwear he tended and his own almost useless, specially built boots. That was when he lost track of his contemporaries and hobbled out of our dimensions of time and space. That was when his own people became to him as speculative as flowers and as remote as figures in history. During his prime, in the cobbler's shop, Krinon studied us not against the substantial, and at that time even prosperous, background of our town, but rather he fitted us into an historic scene, a decade of civilisation, an era of morals. The cobbler noticed it first; and out of awe for Krinon and fear of death, he left him that profitable little business employing three people and providing more than enough for one cripple's keep.

Then the beginning of our long troubles came with the increase of the garrison, the requisitioning and billeting, the interrogations and persuasions, the sets of orders and the prohibitions. Even during that early period of bewilderment, Krinon's name was never mentioned as being associated with any particular principles. They billeted troops in his house and they used one of his outbuildings as a store: but the authorities felt uneasy about coercing him, and the soldiers treated him with rough respect. For the first time we observed in Krinon that quality for which there is no other word than dignity.

After the first few people had been shot—I forget why—

he took to visiting the cemetery, not to see the executions but apparently to contemplate the fresh graves, rather as he looked at the living children in the street. The cemetery-keeper used a startlingly apt phrase when he said that Krinon seemed to sit in judgment over the dead, heeding neither mourners nor flowers. Later, after various prohibitions had made it almost an offence to glance at a grave and certainly a suspicious act to contemplate one, Krinon by some extraordinary persistence continued to haunt the place under the very eyes of the authorities.

And so also he came to haunt the living, persistently, without commentary, without favour, mercilessly. The dark time came when strangers, no longer fellow-countrymen (we dared not call them enemies), marched and counter-marched across our province, using this town of ours without troubling with its name, as a headquarters, a depot, a base, a staging-post. Then it was that it became necessary to make compromises to live, to debase the laws, to defile old shrines, to cast mud even at old acquaintances and friends, and, above all, to guard against the young. Krinon had no special privileges and put up no particular defiance: but as always he exercised his remarkable talent for being left to himself. Nobody could say that he was shown respect either by ourselves or by the enemy: but he was afforded a degree of indifference which bordered upon toleration. He was pushed over the river bridge or up the cemetery slope by children as ever, and I swear that the young people who themselves had pushed him in former times murmured behind the shutters of their faces: 'There goes old Krinon. They daren't touch him. Bless him!'

He looked at them, at us, at the strangers, at the public hangings among the flowers in the square, at the private disquiet, at the anxieties of many of us to save what could be saved, at the looting, at the fierce despair of the young; at

the callous happiness of the pinched children, just as if he was assessing these events, and all, living and dead, who belonged to them, against the great blemish of history upon our continent. The lustre of his hungry understanding began to stalk us as it almost seemed to daunt our oppressors: but the secret young and the candid children rallied, without any word spoken, about his slow, relentless chair.

When at last that darkness broke and we enjoyed brief, vague happiness in a glare of vengeance, of words torrentially gushing on the radio, of random shooting, of ceremonies, there was always talk of fêting Krinon in some special way: but nothing appropriate could ever be devised and he himself spent most of his time in the new extension to the cemetery.

In all the confusion of the dark years, however, his vigilance had been steady. He knew all about us, the living and the dead. His incorruptibility assessed all in the light of stern, unassailable principles, uncomfortable to many. Latterly it has been generally admitted that the goodwill of Krinon, or at least his silent approbation, are assets of the greatest worth. His position, and the veneration or fear in which he has been held, are illustrated by such slight incidents as that of the mountain cream: and indeed it was that incident which gave me the idea of storming his obstinate virtue in the way that I have.

Our exiles were still coming back, dazed, irresolute, quarrelsome and often awkward to fit back into our community life, after our assumption of their death and division of their goods to the advantage of those of us who had suffered so much these many years. Many of them, to establish their identities, went to Krinon, who objectively and precisely set out their rights. There were many children: and it was among these as they arrived that I caused a search to be made. I need not tell you how we avoided traces of obvious debauchery, conceit and forwardness: but I felt sure that we should strike

some harmony of all three after the years we had lived through, innocently concealed and cunningly wielded like a long knife after a festival.

This girl child we found, this animal ripened with the pale maggots of pleasure but wearing the dark bloom of one of our celebrated plums, was kept aside and taught the virtues of Krinon, the cripple. She would bring him nothing but her helplessness, she would demand nothing but his whole attention, her heart to mend, her ways to cobble, her sufferings to cure. I take some small pride in the exactness of my calculations, of my part in this duel in which she is my weapon. She entered Krinon's heart as a child: then suddenly she strutted in possession as a woman. It was only a matter of days before her backward glances as she pushed his chair, her flaunted trespass within his house and her calculated indiscretion in his room, presented us with damning evidence of his debauchery in the eyes of the law.

I do not know how old is this lovely girl with the bloom of a plum and the heart-stone of a sour almond, but we took the trouble to grant her papers which would establish the age required. All such details are thought of, and there need be little fear of the intricacies of procedure since, perhaps I should have explained, I am myself the judge. Yes, I will confess that my new office to which I have been appointed after so many uneasy years will be smoother, I think, without the damnable, relentless impartiality of Krinon. For we will waste no time in ridding ourselves of the affront of him very soon after I have finished these notes, in which, to focus my thoughts and to contain my impatience for the proceedings, I have jotted down the gist of his story.

It remains now to speak to this girl they have shown in, to brief her a little, to make arrangements for her future in the next province. I had hardly expected . . .

*If I go on writing this somebody may come. By writing this I will*



*gain time. By writing this, ignoring the gun she has pulled out, and the saintly look on her face, I am creating evidence if anything should happen. By writing this I am keeping calm myself and distracting her as she aims. If anything should happen, Krinon is implicated on a capital offence by my writing this. But I don't want Krinon contemplating my grave. Why doesn't somebody come? By writing this . . .*

## A SAFE COUNTRY

His journey began, its irrelevance planned, its lack of purpose detailed, all fares paid, and a book of tickets in his wallet. Trebor knew exactly what he was to do, when and where he was to give lectures. What might also be required of him had been hinted, not stated. For the first time in years he was alone; in the midst of people, but always alone.

After crowded dangerous years it was like a dream to be in this safe land. All sorts of reflexes, precautions, habits, pushed themselves to the surface: but, in spite of them, he was fighting off sleep as if the whole place was an overheated room. The urbane trivialities, the opulent standards of living, the card-indexed culture, were seen through half-opened eyes. Some consciousness of his own oddity in the smooth pattern of the place plagued him slightly, but it soon passed.

The first-class saloon coach in which he travelled was framed with polished mahogany, upholstered in slightly worn red leather, curtained with faded puce serge. No draughts came through the double windows. The steam heat glazed the interior air so that the thin embroideries of snow upon the evergreen landscape outside had the cosy charm of old-fashioned wall-paper. Hefty, well-nourished passengers neatly folded their top-coats, slipped off goloshes and, seated, gazed at the thick newspapers, turning page after page which presented the news of the whole world to this safe country. Very soon they dozed.

Each day at his destination he was met by similar men with sober welcomes; and similar formal interest was displayed in the subject matter of his discourse in which he described the sufferings and triumphs of his own people. To these safe people his words formed an interesting tale tinged a little by

romance, an entertainment for a winter evening. There were some among them, to be sure, who were curious about suffering, some who had theories about how it could be overcome. There were many more who wished only to hear Trebor speak of his impressions of their country, the excellencies of the food to his unaccustomed palate, the astonishing progress of social services, and indeed the perfection of almost everything which a man can praise or bring to notice in order that it may be praised.

He praised them all because it was his duty, answered their questions about suffering, and enjoyed a melancholy pleasure in warning them that not even a safe land with so many good intentions is safe for ever. He used his eyes meanwhile. His wits pointed out to him the many fears that threaded this docile people, the many meannesses which propped up their placid generosity, the many resorts to cunning which fortified their well-known generosity. Sometimes he felt shabby and sick because of this. Sometimes he lapsed from his duty and got drunk in more or less congenial company, and in private in accordance with custom in that land.

After such an evening, he lay back half asleep in the train taking him to the next place. In the saloon compartment there were two other passengers, strangers to each other, preoccupied with newspapers and with keeping in check the heavy meals which slopped inside them, to and fro, with the motion of the train. He himself read a newspaper which had reached him a week old, in his own language, thus revealing the foreigner that he was. One of the business men had glanced through such a newspaper too, revealing in his turn that he knew that language, but never speaking a word of it or smiling or showing recognition. The other man whistled abstractedly a tune which soon got on Trebor's nerves, for it was so familiar yet so uncharacteristic of any one country that you could never put a name to it.

The inspector came in, and each of them handed over a book of tickets. The inspector was cat-like. He took his time over the tickets of the business men. His breathing and the whistler's tune wove an *obbligato* over the rhythm of the train. Then came a torrent of words about Trebor's tickets.

'I'm sorry, I don't understand you,' said Trebor, speaking his own language. Nevertheless the inspector spoke at great length, indignantly waving the tickets about, and carrying them away under the light in the middle of the compartment for scrutiny. Trebor, embarrassed, a little irritated, stood up and spoke in the three languages which are most commonly known. With all the obstinacy for which the folk of that safe country are renowned, the inspector repeated himself, speaking louder and losing his formal manners as if such a shabby first-class passenger had actually intruded upon his peace of mind.

It was a silly scene, repeated over and over again with the inspector backing towards the door of the saloon still clutching the ticket as if to get help: and the whistler rising to look on and the other passenger listening amusedly, standing by the window. To him at last Trebor said: 'Surely, sir, as I saw you were reading a newspaper in my language, you would be willing to tell me what this fellow is trying to say in yours?'

'Of course. If you wish it I shall be very pleased to.'

'You can see what a state I'm in,' Trebor continued, outraged by the code of manners which shut out the natural courtesies. The passenger called upon the inspector to come in, and in a few sentences pacified him. The official bowed formally and retired. The whistler ceased his tune, breaking off in the middle of a note and reaching for his goloshes.

'I am much obliged to you, sir,' said Trebor. 'Was there something wrong with my tickets?'

'Nothing wrong. Oh no. It is simply a custom to ask certain

questions of passengers travelling to garrison towns such as Lode. A precaution, you know. Most of our employees on the State railways are good linguists. This one was exceptional. Don't you find our railways are very efficiently run?' He waited for the inevitable compliment before putting on his goloshes.

'Very well run.'

'We think so too.' The train pulled up at a neat white town on the end of a frozen lake. The two business men got out, and a number of officers, evidently going to the garrison town of Lode, which was the terminus, got in. They talked together in clipped friendly voices as they stripped off their top-coats and revealed carefully tended tunics. The train slid away from the lake. Trebor settled himself again and reached up for the brief-case which contained his notes and papers. It flopped open on his knee. It was empty.

He jumped up and searched. The officers stopped talking, watching him. A young lieutenant seemed to understand his distress. His eyes were warm and lively and he took it upon himself to ask in Trebor's language: 'What is it you are looking for?' He spoke precisely, with obvious enjoyment in the use of that tongue.

'Why, all the things out of my brief-case.'

'But that is impossible,' said an elderly major. 'You surely could not lose the contents and still have the case.'

'That is what I have lost, my dear sir.'

'Nonsense. That would suggest thieving; and upon our State railways in this country such a thing would be impossible. We are proud of our State railways; and I hope you will find them comfortable.'

'Of course.' Trebor, even in his anxiety, responded dutifully.

'Perhaps you remember taking your papers out?' the young man suggested, kindly, interestedly. He was a charming person this, not much younger than Trebor himself, though

for Trebor life had been so much harder that he felt himself senior by many years.

'No,' said Trebor. 'I have not consulted my papers on this train. Just now I had an argument with the inspector, a misunderstanding really, about my ticket. Otherwise I have not moved. . . .' As he said it his mind leapt accusatively towards the two passengers, the strangers to each other. 'There were two travellers here who have got out. . . .'

'You are travelling to Lode?' the Major interrupted, parrying the very accusation in his mind.

'Yes, I am,' Trebor said. 'I wonder if one of you gentlemen would mention to the inspector that I—about my loss. I do not myself have the honour of speaking your language.'

The young lieutenant jumped to his feet and presented himself. 'My name is Nitram.'

'Our language,' the Major said smoothly, 'is not widely known as we are a small country, but it is very expressive. Our officials, however, are conversant with two or three of the languages most generally in use.'

'This inspector is not. He cannot understand a word I say in *any* language.' Trebor did not mean to sound argumentative, but his temper had long been frayed by the smooth complacencies of the safe land and now a sense of danger in his loss sharpened his tongue. The train rolled through the evergreen country embroidered with snow where nothing had ever happened. The compartment was warm, clean, sealed off from time, space, free movement. His mind, suddenly overwrought, checked over the papers he had lost. There was nothing secret. There was his journal of impressions. There were notes for forthcoming lectures, embarrassing rather than confidential, as they revealed his method of explaining the stresses of his own country. There were all sorts of odds and ends, people's addresses in other countries, but nothing to indicate that he was on the look out for

Taurus, for imprints of that sign which once had blotted out the sun from his own and many other countries and from which the safe country had of course been safe.

So with the sense of danger on him he turned from the Major to the young Lieutenant Nitram in whose eyes there was such life and ease and said: 'Please speak to the inspector and report my loss when he comes round, anyway. . . .'

'You are not suggesting, I hope, that your fellow-passengers . . . ' said the Major.

'I did not know them and I can hardly describe them. But one never knows.' Trebor tried to assemble every detail of them in his mind. Suddenly the one who had whistled became focused vividly because of the very same whistle in his ear. Trebor started. It was the Major now who whistled that same tune without beginning or end; and the doors slid open and the inspector bowed to the military. He listened attentively when Nitram spoke of the loss, but shook his head.

'The inspector knows nothing,' Nitram said with genuine concern.

'How could he know anything!' said the Major. 'He is not accustomed to such happenings. None of us is. Don't you find us singularly free from anxiety over trifles? Don't you find us well organised on the whole?' he asked Trebor with a return of good humour.

'Of course I do,' said Trebor. As he said it, he caught the eye of young Nitram, who winked.

'You, sir, are the gentleman who is to lecture to us at Lode?' Nitram said. 'I think I saw your picture in one of the national newspapers.' He pulled out his notebook. 'I should be honoured to have your signature. I am coming to your lecture, of course. Many of us are coming.'

Trebor signed his book, a little warmed within himself by the display of enthusiasm. He opened his own notebook and said: 'Here, you must sign for me too and write your tele-

phone number so that I may ring you from my hotel and invite you to dinner before the lecture.'

He was wearied with dining alone or in official company. He watched Nitram scrawl his name and the whistled tune played on his nerves. Here was something at last, surely something justifying suspicion. Perhaps one might learn from this young Nitram . . . perhaps . . .

Nitram bowed his acceptance gracefully: and Trebor, pre-occupied with suspicion, watched the sad evergreen countryside, embroidered with snow. Somewhere hidden might be Taurus, the resistance movement of the mind, the discipline of the spirit. Somewhere might be those men, cunning, defeating death, imperilling not the safe country but Trebor's country for which he had fought during these long years which had made him old and separated him from his happiness.

Dinner that evening with Nitram was lively, for Nitram spoke of the world and of events outside his own country. He had gusto and called for good wine and raised his voice to reject some of the rich dishes and order better ones. With all his spirit and his native discretion, he failed to conceal his admiration of Trebor's country, though he spoke casually of the struggle, even implying slight mockery of the safety of his own land.

'Tonight,' he said suddenly, 'I have done myself the honour of arranging for you to have supper with us at a little party after your lecture when the Commandant will have retired. You will forget your official mission, I hope, and even the loss of your papers and we'll entertain you, I promise you.'

The lecture took place and Trebor found himself looking forward to supper with Nitram, whom he saw in the hall, eager and enthusiastic amid the native constraint of that audience. The young officers, when the Commandant had retired, were certainly entertaining. Everybody drank plenty: there were regimental songs: then inevitably came the sug-



gestion that Trebor should be initiated into the feminine company of Lode. Trebor, arm-in-arm with Nitram and Statal, the only other civilian there, was escorted into the Blue Boar: but, alas, the dregs of the garrison women there assembled with tired eyes and loud mouths greedy for champagne, soon damped them all. It was then that Statal said: 'That settles it, you all come on to my little farm.'

The 'little farm' had cropped up in conversation time and time again. Because of his habit of inconsequential buffoonery, Statal enjoyed a slightly condescending popularity among the young officers. He in turn treated his companions with cynical indulgence. 'They are, after all, the only possible local company in a garrison town,' he said in an aside to Trebor. 'In a dozen other places which are more amusing I would keep a dozen times more amusing company. Do you remember the Grand Hotel at . . .?' Such was Statal's refrain: and the burden of his song always was that they all should visit his little farm.

It was a motor ride through the forest: and they went singing in crowded cars which crunched the newly fallen snow. They arrived before a portico tricked out garishly in light. The phrase 'little farm' was a joke indeed. The Renaissance panelling of Statal's dining-room was gilded with many candles. The company roared and frolicked through half a dozen reception rooms variously rich, appointed with grace and wit in accord with period but omitting no garnishing of modern comfort.

Only for Trebor, the warmth, the company and the drink so weakened him that reality was glazed. Nitram laughed merrily. 'You say it was your last lecture before you go back to the capital, and I consider myself all the more lucky not to have missed it. Are you satisfied with *all* you have done?' Trebor struggled with reality, with caution, and with a second sight which picked out the word 'all'. Nitram meant

something in his emphasis. He was probing with his words and his look, deeper than the hectic façade of that social evening.

'You must see upstairs,' said Statal, interrupting them. He was overdoing his duties as host without doubt. He was beside himself with happiness at their open wonder and astonishment as they explored the spacious and tasteful voluptuousness of the 'little farm'. Possibly these suites of rooms had been kept for exhibition at such moments as this. 'You don't often have company?' Trebor said, as they walked up the wide stairs. 'I entertain from time to time,' Statal answered, with pride. 'But rarely local people. Rarely even the officers of the garrison, for my connection with them is a new one. But now,' he added, linking arms with them, inebriated perhaps with his own good drink, perhaps with pride, 'this will amaze you.'

They were amazed. The salons below had been sumptuous, but the bedchambers outdid them in their appointments altogether. Each seemed to be a principal bedroom, each contained an immense bed. Statal had just launched out into a description of what fun it all was when a servant hurried towards him.

'Excuse me if I leave you for a few minutes,' Statal said. 'Look at the other rooms by all means; you won't find anybody in bed, I assure you.'

'What were you asking downstairs, when we were interrupted, Nitram? What did you mean exactly?' Nitram laughed and flung himself down on the huge, white satin bed in the room they had just entered. He said: 'You gave me an impression of anxiety, of a mission only partly fulfilled. It does not do for me to talk even in private, you understand. But I could guess your thoughts in a country like this and I wanted you to know that there are people like me concealed in every walk of life in this country, people of goodwill to

whom the struggle meant . . . ' He yawned in spite of himself, and his yawn, curiously enough, did not detract from his sincerity.

The diffusion of light which seemed to produce a glow even beneath his eyelids, the soft carpeting which almost sucked him down to rest, and all the giddiness of drink and exhaustion in the dainty panelled room, was cloying Trebor, who was more accustomed to harder ways. He walked idly across the bedchamber in order to keep awake. He leant against a massive inlaid bureau. Who would ever need to think or to write in such a room . . . ?

Somebody was passing down the passage with muted footsteps. Nitram on the bed sighed and raised himself on one elbow. There was the distant clatter of the party down below: and then, distinctly, came the sound, whistled through clenched teeth, of that tune without beginning or end, so familiar, yet so uncharacteristic of any one country. Nitram recognised it, and smiled sleepily, nodding and making a wry face. 'You understand?' he murmured. 'It is everywhere.'

Trebor started. That comment was so revealing and so unexpected. As he heaved himself clumsily upright the bureau slid open, and he turned to close it.

There, neatly arranged within, were his own papers, the contents of his brief-case. 'You'd better tell me what you know, Nitram; I trust you. Tell me now while we're alone,' he said over his shoulder, his hand stealing down to finger his papers, count them, fold them and lift them. Nitram's sleepy voice was replying slowly. 'I said it is everywhere. I can't say much more than that now. But I think I can help you in the long run. Perhaps I can tell you something vital about Taurus, but not indoors. On the way home when . . . ' Abruptly his voice ceased and Trebor, leaning over the open bureau, made much play of lighting a cigarette. 'Yes?' he said. 'Go on. We'll arrange to go home together, shall we?' He flicked the papers

into his inner pocket, and turned. Nitram was truly asleep. No wonder, in the bright soporific softness of that room. Trebor's own senses were fighting against the muted sleepy silence: and his hot, clumsy prickliness of sweat was a presentiment of danger. 'Let's get back downstairs, Nitram. Come on.' He closed the bureau with a bang and strode over to the bed. He caught Nitram's right hand which lay gracefully beneath his elaborate uniform cuff. 'Come on, man. No good staying there.' He forced a laugh and pulled. Nitram slid towards him, leaving a wet red smear. The whole of the back of his pale uniform tunic was dark and sodden. His mouth sagged wide open in a lifeless gasp and he slid slowly into a heap, soiling the carpet.

Trebor stood up, turned to the door and opened his mouth, but his parched voice made no sound in the vitiated air.

As he turned back, he looked at the crumpled, wet heap of Nitram at his feet. The panelling of the bedchamber swung giddily round him. It was difficult to focus. Nevertheless, as he focused upon the smear on the satin bedspread and upon the dead man, he saw that two of the panels moved. He must get Nitram's friends. He made for the door, trying to remember any of their names. Upon the threshold a gentle arm fell on his shoulder. Statal, with an intoxicated laugh, was saying: 'Well, old boy, you haven't found anybody in the beds, I bet. Though we pride ourselves that it is rather a bachelor's dream. . . .'

'Get inside there, Statal, and do what you can. I am going to fetch his friends up.'

Trebor swung round and eased Statal through the doors. It was a reflex action quicker than thought: a lesson well learned during the long years of the struggle.

Statal laughed, a brittle, high-pitched laugh, but in a second Trebor had snatched out the key, swung the doors together and locked them from the outside.

Heavily, resolutely, he ran down the corridor to the head of the staircase. He could hear the party going on as he looked over the balustrade and paused: and in the darkness of the gallery opposite him he could hear somebody whistling that tune without beginning or end.

Bursting in among the mirrors and gilt of the main salon, he realised how distraught and over-dramatic must be his appearance to people living in that safe country. He shouted over the noise, unable to pick out exactly those whom he knew to be especial friends of Nitram. Several of the younger officers, a little riotous with drink, so far forgot themselves as to roar with laughter at his outburst and to point. Very soon, however, there was silence and he stated urgently and simply in the three languages most generally known that Nitram was lying dead, covered with blood, in the bedchamber upstairs and that he had not liked the look of Statal and that he had locked him in, and that they must all pull themselves together and come up and do what they could. His left hand went into his inner pocket and touched his papers and his conviction of danger was suddenly very potent. The people of that safe country, even those who wore uniform, were unaccustomed to violent action and, realising this, he felt himself to be in command, but always at the back of his mind was the consciousness of his mission, seeking out those last dangerous potencies of Taurus which might be lingering here in refuge.

So he led them up the wide creaking stairs, and, with his instinct for command and position, he waited until they were gathered round before he unlocked the bedchamber doors. He selected two hefty fellows and said: 'We three will go in,' and then he boldly flung the doors inward. The soft diffusion of light fell upon the great bed, the great bureau and the pale yielding carpet. No red smear violated the satin bedspread, nor was there any sign of Nitram crumpled and sodden upon the floor. From behind somebody pushed through the men and

came into the room, gently throwing one arm round Trebor's shoulder. 'What on earth are you up to, my dear chap? Is this some game of hide-and-seek?' Statal strolled across and sat down on the bed. 'What are we all playing at? Can't I join in?' he said, addressing the group.

Trebor said: 'Where is Nitram?' pointing to the spot where blood had soaked from Nitram's body into the pale carpet.

'Nitram? I saw him off about ten minutes ago when he received an urgent 'phone call. I arranged for my own man to run him back to the barracks in the two-seater. He said something about having been posted to another garrison. He was so upset he asked me not to say anything about it.'

One by one, incredulously, humorously, resentfully, the astonished group round the door told how Trebor had rushed into the salon, shouting about a tragedy upstairs and Nitram lying in a pool of blood.

Statal stood up at last and came boldly over, linking Trebor upon his arm. 'It is a great compliment,' he said, 'to the wine of my country when a guest of this house can delight us with such a macabre and realistic hallucination. Three cheers for our distinguished stranger from overseas.' A nightmare swell of laughter overwhelmed Trebor and he could see their faces bobbing like corks in the bright light. He suffered himself to be led downstairs in mock triumph. He accepted Statal's offer, without even the energy to be wary, of a limousine to take him to his hotel. All the way, through the grey, haggard night of the forest and the snow, he was pursued by their laughter, harsher than any laughter that he had known in the long struggle outside this safe country.

He locked the door of his room in the hotel and sat down at the writing-desk to compose a telegram tactfully worded to indicate that he had at last made a discovery. As he unbuttoned his jacket, however, he found that his inner pocket was empty. The excitement of Nitram's death and disappearance, the frus-

tration of that chorus of hefty laughter which followed it, had put the papers out of his mind. He had been unwary, and they had been taken again. Wearily, with automatic military sense of positions, he began to push his bed into a corner out of line of the window: then, utterly exhausted, he fell forward and slept.

The chambermaid smiled in the morning as she put down his coffee, stepping over his shoes. The fact that the distinguished lecturer had made a night of it and lay fully clothed on a bed in his disarranged room was swiftly whispered round the hotel. There was a good deal of curiosity about it, for the people of that safe country loved to read of riotous things or of orgies which took place behind closed doors. Statal's chauffeur gave them pleasure by smiling knowingly and shaking his head when he arrived and asked to be permitted to carry a small package up to the 'poor gentleman' in his room.

To Trebor he bowed and said: 'These papers, sir, were found against a bureau in the bedchamber which you visited last night. Mr. Statal thought that you might need them urgently. Mr. Statal has also asked me to inquire about your health and to convey to you the message that any slight disturbance last night at his estate is a matter which is entirely overlooked.' Statal's chauffeur bowed profoundly. 'Little incidents such as these, if I may be so bold, sir, occur from time to time in the houses of the gentry in this country. We always see to it that they are overlooked.' Trebor held the papers in his hand. Returning to his full consciousness, he groped dimly towards his own nature. There was most of the day to be spent in Lode before he could take a train on to the Capital. He could still write a discreet telegram. He went across to the writing-table and wrote briefly and with discretion such a message as he knew would be fully understood by people of his own nation. Then he told himself that the sensible thing to

do would be to telephone to the barracks and ask for Nitram, however curious and even dangerous such a request might seem to be on the part of a foreigner. He lay on his bed and spoke to the barracks in the three languages most generally understood. He was informed courteously in his own language that Nitram had been posted and had left his good wishes, when he departed at dawn, to the distinguished foreigner who had honoured him at dinner. Drowsily he put down the telephone.

He awoke some hours later, shivery, dejected. He had slept too long. He could see snow falling in a despairing afternoon light. He took up the telephone again and inquired if there had been any reply to his telegram to the Capital. He was listening to the hall porter explaining that, owing to the unusual snowfall, all lines were down between the city of Lode and the Capital, when there was a knock at the door and Statal was shown in.

'I come to offer my good wishes to you on your departure. If our evening together turned out to be a little boisterous, as I fear it may have done, I tender my apologies. I trust that my servant brought belongings of yours which we found on the floor. I very much hope that one summer in the not very distant future you will honour us by another visit. Meanwhile I have brought my motor-car as it is almost impossible to get taxis on days like this when there has been a very heavy snowfall.'

There was just time to dress, pack and catch the only train to the Capital. Trebor felt no sense of danger now, but only anxiety to escape from Lode, to disentangle his mind from the uncertainty and duplicity which threatened him at every turn. Statal had waited politely downstairs in the foyer. He handed Trebor the three local newspapers containing reports of his lectures. He smiled and said: 'You have made a very good impression here, my friend.'



In the car Trebor realised that he had been holding his breath. Reality was slipping away from him. When the railway station came into view, he blurted out: 'How long have you been implicated with the Taurus people, Statal?' The question was an unconscious tactical surprise: it was a shock even to himself. It failed. Statal tapped him on the knee in the friendliest way.

'I am disappointed if you are one of those people who believe that this country of ours, so traditionally peace-loving and progressive, would implicate itself in Taurus. As for myself, well, you have seen for yourself how I live . . . perhaps I am rather more sybaritic than is usual in this country, but, there, I am always discreet. By the way, I must ask you before you go, what did you really imagine you saw in my house last night?'

'Every sign of Taurus. Death, treachery, all the evil which, God knows, I have learnt to recognise. That is what I saw in your house, Statal.' There was silence: then the chauffeur opened the door and the stationmaster bowed.

'I can hear the train,' Statal said with a yawn. 'Our trains, as I am sure you have noticed, run exactly to time. We are a little proud of them, in fact.' Statal sealed off the ugly words as if he had never heard them. Already Trebor was doubting if he himself really had said what he had just said.

On the long journey to the Capital he struggled against sleep. The steam heat glazed the interior air so that the embroideries of snow, heavier now, upon that evergreen landscape, looked cosy and remote. Every now and then he went through the papers in his brief-case. Who had read them? Suppose he himself, overwrought by the long struggle of his own land and overwhelmed by the soft and ample abundance of this safe country, suppose he had suffered from hallucination? Suppose he had allowed his inmost thought to dwell too much upon Taurus? The sight of Nitram crumpled at his

feet already had the shrill substance of an unresolved dream. What evidence was he bringing back with him? What could he offer his own people but a sealed-off nightmare, a fantastical broth of weariness and nerves?

So he tortured himself into remaining silent both in the Capital and in his own country when he returned and made various reports.

During that winter of his return, however, post cards arrived from various garrison towns for him signed by Nitram, and he had no difficulty in deciding that the signature they bore was not that which Nitram, laughing and eager, had entered in his notebook. But when at last he reported his experience at Lode, and produced the signatures as exhibits, even his own people laughed and said that nobody could blame him for taking a little pleasure in the wine of that safe country. There had been whispers, it seemed, reaching the Capital and thence even to his own country, about his behaviour at Lode: but everyone was agreed that the slight outburst had been quite forgivable after all he had been through. After a month or two, the post cards stopped.



## THE THIRD DIMENSION

FEW of our heroes seemed to lose much sleep in after years because of their experiences. It was, of course, very soon borne in upon them that heroism itself was largely a matter of expediency, a high virtue in the heat of the conflict, but a quality of no more significance than, say, aptitude for games, in after years. Most of them understood that. Of course they had many fine qualities, including humility. For those who did not understand, it was just too bad.

He was called H.E. by everybody in the squadron, for he was one of those singular, self-sufficient, remote yet gregarious people whose character fits initials. I have never understood how such a formal but by no means unaffectionate style originates, but I have always observed how its apparent bleakness is no indication of its true measure.

He was often called His Excellency with infuriated and jocular respect. When he was called Henry or Edward, he smiled in an embarrassed way and did not respond. H.E.'s record was heroic; he seemed to have been born to the cool cogencies of the air. His heroism was shared: its infection spread. He became experienced and wise, perhaps a little cynical, but always companionable. 'His Excellency is in terrific form,' people would say, pleased to have him around.

Afterwards he went back to the small township where he had been brought up: and they gave him a public reception which he took dutifully, calmly, gracefully. He had been faithful in his heart to a local girl, to whom he had rarely dared to speak when he left school and went flying. The thought of her had laid like a cherished seed in the soil of his character, retarded by absence, by diffidence, by native caution, while

so many other qualities had crowded and prospered. When he went back, she was already the mother of two children; and she had put his body so far out of her mind that she asked him to sign her autograph book after an official Memorial Service and listened smiling while her husband called him 'sir' and his heart winced with astonishment.

He left the place as soon as he could decently get away, because such small townships have little employment for an officially recognised hero unless he should choose to set up in a bar. He left also because he could never begin to become again the high-school boy he had been. Between his boyhood and his present age was a void of infinite experience, all totally irrelevant. Back in his own place, he had walked the streets and tried to feel that he himself was real. An acknowledged hero amid the secretive and unyielding pattern of humdrum life, his shadow was very small as he walked; but its size frightened him, and he was glad of the opportunity to slip away.

A sophisticated taste, a hankering perhaps for quality, took him back to the Capital: but those who looked out for him at reunions were disappointed, for he avoided his old friends of the squadron. He had been living so quickly during the years of conflict that he was bewildered and uneasy now when slow decisions had to be made. That was how, I suppose, he came to fall into a state of inertia. On this side of the gap, sitting on a high stool, looking resolute and becoming, ordering large drinks with assurance, H.E. was as feckless as a *débutante*. He was, of course, practised in concealing himself: he had been afraid often enough. . . .

'My husband thought he had met you somewhere on active service: and we were just going to ask you over for a drink when he was called away, so I thought I'd break the ice. . . .'

You could see at a glimpse that she was a good woman. She carried her goodness like clothes of quality, without

elegance. When, moreover, she addressed herself to a new acquaintance, her benevolence was like a heavy perfume, embarrassingly close and lavishly indiscriminating. 'My husband says he's sure you're the one who did so marvellously at . . .' She reeled off several of the operations for which H.E. had been famous in his day, and for which he had earned those medals which now lay rather incongruously with his football clothes in an old trunk in his parents' attic. 'My husband will be pleased that you are the one he thought you were,' the good lady said.

Her husband was. He spent the evening reminiscing over a good dinner and he was what could only be called kindness itself. With obtrusive tact he refrained from asking about H.E.'s civilian life: with unobtrusive reflected glory he displayed H.E., the hero, to several of his acquaintances. H.E. was charming but rather restless.

It was the husband who put the proposition to H.E. He said: 'I'm getting on, you know: and the missus and I are finding things getting a bit much sometimes.' He was not more specific because he had a reputation for blunt forthrightness and for leaving all the talk to women. He smiled and slapped H.E. playfully. 'You might feel like helping us.'

'There's all the property to be looked after. There's correspondence which, of course, is more or less common sense,' the wife began, filling in the pattern of their busy, always harmless, often tedious, way of life. And H.E., having little experience of the world outside an airfield and not caring much for the look of what he saw, took the job.

'My wife will show you everything,' the man said some forty-eight hours later. 'Now that you've made yourself at home here, you'll have no difficulty in picking up the threads of our interests outside. I've got a board meeting myself, but trot round with the little woman. Under her guidance, believe me, you'll be taking things off my hands in no time.'

He laughed and laid his hand on H.E.'s shoulder; and his touch focused the sense of isolation, something to which H.E. had often been accustomed in the air, but more intense here and now because there was no urgency or danger, more frightening because of the timeless safety of these people's kindness. Panic, so long dormant, formerly so controlled, opened in his head like an old wound. He had mastered it physically by a simple routine—like a cockpit drill—of closing his eyes momentarily and casting his whole thought towards his job as if it was a target. He closed them now and reeled slightly in the sunlight on the steps of the house, because of the void into which he could cast nothing.

'The sun is quite glaring, isn't it?' the woman said gently. They stood to enjoy the sun. The bright candour of the morning filled slowly with foreboding. He knew what she would say next; but when she said it he started. 'You'll have to take the wheel, of course,' she said. 'I've never learnt to drive a car.'

Smiling sweetly, all unconscious of her challenge, she got into the passenger's seat. He forced a smile too and he said: 'But . . .' and that was all he could say. How preposterous it would be to say that he had never learned to drive either. That there was never time at school, that his people in the distant township had no car, that there was never time or opportunity when one was engrossed and happy with aircraft, that there had always been drivers to drive you about airfields anyway. 'It must be tame, after the air,' she said as he got in, slow, preoccupied and resolute. 'But I hope you'll forgive me if I say that I am always a little nervous in cars.'

'So am I,' he managed to say, telling himself that he knew it all in theory and the thing must be absurdly simple, taken methodically. He eased jerkily out of the drive. His body stiffened. There was a dimension missing. He was physically balked.

'I expect you are not used to this make,' she said, as his

panic drove him to let the car gain some speed. 'But now I really must ask you something. My husband always calls you H.E. and says you're known like that to everyone. All the same, I would like to know what your names really are.'

'Henry Edward,' he said through his teeth, watching the two dimensions of the road. There was time before the bend to shut his eyes and to cast his whole impetus towards this absurd impossible trifle of managing this car.

'I think I shall call you Teddy. Yes, I think *Teddy* would be comfortable, and a little more you. I'm sure your family, when you were young, called you . . .'

She could never tell her husband or anybody else what happened when she stopped looking out of the window and tried to finish that sentence: and H.E., of course, did not live to tell the tale of how that panic which had held in check all those years in the air took possession of him body and soul in a brief nightmare in which there was freedom, sideways, onwards or backwards, but in which the third dimension—the bird-freedom to rise and fall—was lacking. She, when she recovered from her slight injuries, said that the young man seemed suddenly unnerved while they were discussing his name. 'It's quite a recognised thing,' her husband said. 'Many of the medical people know about it. Delayed shock. Delayed nervous reaction. Don't worry, old girl. We did our best for the chap. It was bound to come some time. Poor old H.E. I can't help feeling sorry for him—even if he nearly killed you too, my dear. And driving a car, of all things, after all the dangers he had faced . . .'

The good man sighed, together with all the sympathisers, unaware that H.E. had never learnt to drive a car, and all unconscious of that last, heroic two-dimensional battle in a loneliness more sparse than the rarest fields of air.





## CONCERNING THE FRONTIER

THE delegates took on a grey look. Against the chandeliers and the gilded flattery of mirrors they looked more and more mean, as if issue was going out of them. Were they running down like unwound clocks? Was their purpose expiring within them?

They talked and they smoked, apparently unaware of the way the splendours of the Palace were haunted by words, unmindful of their own loss of issue, unimpressed by sharing a common loss in common purpose. Perhaps, though, it was the habit of faith which gave them the grey look, and the dahlias outside, and the children, the lovers and the bowls-players which enhanced their lack of colour and light.

The boy from the south brought out a bottle of the wine which his uncle had given him and broke all the rules by taking a swig while on duty. By such behaviour, by laughing, by looking wistfully out of the white and gold doorway, by pinching from time to time the rump of the most junior secretary in the office of the Chief of Protocol, he at once affronted the proprieties and drew upon himself a curious attention. He was spoilt with cigarettes and smiles, by a few words in a dozen languages and even by tips (strictly forbidden, and received only with consummate subterfuge). He came from the south, but his ease and his temperament and, above all, the dangerous simplicity of his eyes, touched all these people, from the damp and the cold, from the humid and the hot places, who came there to smoke and to talk. He was on duty, as a rule, in the main lobby: and it was there that she first noticed him.

Her arms were full of papers, for it was impossible to get

through the long day without a massive compendium of papers. Her thoughts were attuned to a statistical problem. Her eyes were full of grey shadows, for she was short-sighted and the long session was telling upon her. Her body, still full of hope, moved ardently, alertly, as if movement in itself might yet command those problems which haunted the Palace, grey like words, like fears.

'Too many papers. Altogether too many papers for a lady.' He sighed, picking up the sheaf which had fallen and scattered as she reached the bottom of the stairs. His smile, disrespectful, kindly, utterly innocent, challenged her. She suddenly recalled her own people, men in the fields, women coming from church, those she had been at school with. Students, the speechless ordinary look of ordinary people passing in the streets of the Capital, all the people she had nearly lost because of her great responsibilities and the pervasion of the problems of the world. She blushed as she reclined towards him in order that he could fit the sheaf of papers into her bundle of folios.

'So much paper!' He sighed, his breath heavy with wine, garlic and simple good living.

Her nostrils quivered: and he knew, in all his ease and knowledge of the world, that she was aware of him. He went on: 'Too much paper, if you ask me, and not enough love.'

She frowned and tried to look over her spectacles. It was absurd that such a statement should interfere with a statistical survey affecting a boundary which ran between five states. It was absurd. She marched the longest way round to the committee room, her step still buoyant, indignation still rippling the orderly surface of her thought. That pool, indeed, might have quietened again for long useful months, or even years, had it not been for certain ethnological characteristics in the people of the world which caused her to seek the comparative birth-rate figures in the five states, and which caused that boy from the south to follow the custom of his

tribe and covet women for their movements less than for their features. She needed the birth-rate analysis and he, folding that analysis neatly into his desk, needed her. With careless, cunning, amused, unhurried passion he was smiling to himself, wondering when she would come back. He took out a newspaper and read that the future of civilisation was bound up in the precarious delineation of a boundary between five states. He yawned, scenting the musty Palace air. He smiled sweetly at a delegate who wished to know the time, and gracefully received a cigarette. How pale her breast had been: like dawn in the olive groves: like . . .

'I don't think I can have picked up all my papers.' She looked anxious, standing first on one foot, then on the other, and peering about through her spectacles as if her papers might be floating round the lobby like birds.

He jumped up, smiling and bold. 'Yes, you left some of them behind. I didn't see them until you had gone.'

'Well, where are they?' She took off her spectacles as she spoke. The warmth of him touched her everywhere, in its sound, its smell, its bold grace. She spoke softly in spite of herself.

He said: 'Oh, I gave them to your friend.'

'My friend? What friend? You have no business to give them to anybody.' Did she mean to stamp her foot or was it just a chance—and a chance also that that little quick stamp was so prized in the courtship of the south?

'You have no business to drop them.' He laughed.

How he laughed, that boy. With his eyes, with his head, and the convention of his uniformed body magically possessed. And that laughter brought a giggle into her throat like a sob, relentless, unquenchable. 'But they are very important,' she spluttered, panic-stricken and outraged. 'They are not *secret* or anything, but we shall want them immediately. That is why I was hurrying with them. That is why . . .

'You dropped them?' His laughter turned to mockery as a breeze will turn an olive leaf in the south.

'Who did you give them to?' she blazed, cold and pale, putting on her spectacles as if they were her very conscience.

'The man who came up and said that he was a friend of yours and that he would give them to you. The short man. . . ' He made a gesture of caricature with a peasant eloquence of his right wrist.

'But who was he, this man?'

'One could try and find him,' said the boy from the south with a determined air.

'I shall go straight to the office of the Chief of Protocol,' she said, gathering together her executive energy, though a fond spirit, which was part of her, still giggled at his elbow.

'You are much too busy for that,' he said. 'Besides, the little short man went that way, up the main stairs. Come back in half an hour, if you like, and I'll have run him to earth, if he hasn't found you.' His eyes turned upon her with the outrageous impertinence of a play upon those words: and she suffered the look. Then she nodded and hurried away towards the committee-room, going lightly, anxiously but to his great satisfaction as he stood with one hand in the desk fondling the birth-rate analysis of the five states.

The delegates worked hard in the next thirty minutes. They succeeded in reducing the delineation of the frontier to less than a dozen formulæ, of which one concerned the comparative birth rates in the five states. The boy from the south was packing up his small case in which he kept his uncle's bottle of wine, for his watch of duty was at an end, when she rushed into the lobby with movements which entranced him, but with a pathetic anxiety behind her spectacles. Before she could speak, he said, with all the

cunning of the hard south: 'I found that he went out and I know where he can be got. If you like to meet me in an hour's time on the steps of the fruit market . . .'

She sighed, for suddenly she heard the voice of her own people, the ordinary speech of ordinary northern people. She recognised an old guile, but she was powerless to confront it with words. 'But this is absurd,' she thought she heard herself saying. 'I shall go straight to the Chief of Protocol. The whole procedure in committee is jeopardised—or at least our delegation's part of it—by the loss of these papers.' No sound came from her half-open mouth. The great echoes of the old Palace were listening for her, but she made no sound. The small sweetness of her breath lay upon the musty air. He lifted up his little case, saluted in his clumsy, nonchalant way, winked at his relief who was opening the top of the desk, and went.

She gasped, possessed by amused hatred of herself: but she could not fall back into her customary calm, into that objectivity so much valued by the delegation. They thought she was ill when she hurried in and said there would be a delay over the papers. When she hurried out without explanation, they were even a little shaken about the validity of the case which rested upon the comparative birth rate in the five states. When a crisis descended upon them just before dinner, they had to concede to an adjournment: and a frontier between the five states was further off than ever.

News of that, however, had not been announced in the newspapers by the time the two of them met upon the steps of the fruit market, and the boy from the south placed the birth-rate statistics into her left hand and a sudden lush kiss upon her left cheek.

The frontier between the five states, however, would have been settled a thousand times quicker and more eugenically if those papers had not been discovered casually in a marble-

topped piece of furniture which might perhaps have answered as a bedside table, in one of the inconspicuous but easy-going hotels behind the fruit market, usually run by people from the south.

## WELL, WHAT DO YOU WANT?

'WELL, what do you want? There must be many things, many ways in which we could show our appreciation if only you people were not so proud. Mind you, we admire your pride: but we do find it slightly difficult to know what you want.' He remembered that message, the kindliness, the remoteness of it, as he had stood by the crater, and gazed towards the poplars which were dishevelled but not seriously hurt by the explosion. He supposed, looking back on it, that he must have been dazed and consequently callous. Possibly he was so wounded by the event, not unexpected though it was, that his sensibilities were numbed to a degree of indifference which was almost churlish. 'I do not think we are proud,' he had written defensively. 'I think we are just preoccupied.' Then he had dismissed the whole theme with the words: 'You remember the fringe of poplars, the ones which stand like figures awaiting a ceremonial? Well, they made a deep obeisance, of course; they gave to the blast, and that courtesy saved them.' The conceit had given him a little pleasure at the time: it had seemed a bold fancy in the midst of the ruin which encompassed his home and his work. For it had been ruin altogether more painful than one could ever suppose, because of its partial nature, its maladroit selection. To have destroyed the whole of the clothes, but to have left the layette for the baby which had never needed it: to have broken all the bottles and left the glasses: to have wiped out his unfinished work and to have left all the early stuff, of academic interest perhaps but of so little intrinsic worth. Such was the clownish pattern of his private ruin: and what could he have said that he wanted? What did he not need, as he had swept up broken glass with



philosophy, drained off beauty with the pools of notable wines and hosed water, and tried to put together a way of life with tarpaulins and sheaves of regulations. So what, then, did he want?

'We could never imagine what it was you wanted most, you see. We pictured you here: and yet we could never see you. We could only imagine the poplars, which of course you mentioned. Now things are getting normal again and you've managed to carry on in this way and even turn that hideous crater into a sunken flower garden, now we feel we can ask you what do you want? As a start we thought we'd like to move you right away into the sun somewhere. We feel that a philosopher like you should not be bothered with shortages, and regulations and requisitioning. You are too important.'

'It is astonishing how much better the beech burns than the ash,' he said. 'Though I would rather handle pear wood than either when it comes to working with a saw.' It was the first thing which came into his head. He was embarrassed. He was not a shy man, nor one attached to narrow ways. Ruin in his own place, in his own country, within his continent, had not laid waste the channels of his mind nor swamped the tides of his understanding. He was just realising that much had remained fast not only within himself but among other people.

'Ah! There you go with your understatement of calamity, with your mockery of events which, even on the other side of the world, were almost unbearable to contemplate.'

'Easier to endure than to contemplate?' he said quickly, tentatively.

'You have endured them and survived, but thousands haven't.'

'But thousands have,' he added, again tentatively, and with an infuriating levity which was like a large man's sigh at a trifling exertion. 'Thousands survived as I did: and philo-

sophy has its roots in survivors as well as in martyrs and indeed in onlookers. But'—he made a courtly gesture, a sweep which belonged to the Old School, that most controversial and, by modern standards, vulnerable of faculties—'you have been so sympathetic that it is absurd for people like myself to mix up experience with awareness. I am grateful to you.'

'Grateful for what? We have done nothing yet. It is a matter of what you want; what do you want?'

'So much!' He looked out over the crater which was splendid with bizarre, wittily planted flowers.

'We'll begin then by fixing your move right away, into the place we've thought of, not too remote but so restful. It may not be ideal, but it will emancipate you at least from the suffering of this continent.'

'The suffering of this continent?' He looked about him and laughed, as if it was a continent he saw. 'There is no emancipation from such suffering. No, look at the poplars, they gave to the blast, you know. They stood when so much fell down. I shall stay, if you don't mind, where I can see the poplars—like figures awaiting a ceremonial.'

'But what do you want?'

Once, he told himself, for a few hours he had wanted everything they could give. Their kindness, like a stroked arm, their security like a hot drink after shock, their goodwill like a rich lady's hand, their innocence and their honesty and their faith as curative and inevitable as the tides of the sea. 'But now I am content to stay here and watch the poplars. Such a ceremonial pattern. . . . Yes, who is it?' He looked with kindly relief towards the intrusion, for he was beginning to feel uneasy about this question of what he wanted.

'It is a young man, an official,' they said.

'I'll see him, of course.' He turned to them and smiled with much that could not be said in front of an official welling

in his eyes. He said: 'You are kind people and I feel gratitude to you for your former messages and for your present practical sympathy. But I belong to a time and place, my time. Though much has gone, I still have the poplars.' Their kindness and this simplification of his profound beliefs brought tears.

He turned quickly to the young man, who handed him an order and who stood uncertainly, feeling that it was incumbent upon him to explain it. Evidently he was shy because of the people, the strangers with the opulent luggage and searching smiles.

'It's a requisitioning order, sir,' he said sheepishly.

'Oh yes?' The philosopher was gentle, tired, courteous.

'The row of poplars. We have to widen the highway,' the youth said with blushing earnestness. 'We are sorry that you were not given more notice: but this requisition is quite in order, and if you will sign here in front of a witness . . .'

'A witness?'

'Of course, sir, a witness is a mere formality, witnessing the fact that you are in agreement that the poplar trees be liquidated.'

'Liquidated?' He frowned without anger.

'Well, cut down in the interests of progress, the widening of the highway.'

'Witnesses?' he said, signing the requisition, and smiling at his visitors. 'Please have the goodness to witness this.'

So they witnessed the requisition order for the ceremonial poplars to be cut down in order that the road be wider between the municipal gravel pit and the public cemetery.

## STAY JUST AS YOU ARE

I KNOW that those were the last words that I said as I went away and doors closed behind a whole happiness. When I said them I could feel a strange blood within me. The sun was shining on your island as it is shining now. Your people said that I was obsessed with the turbulence in my own country: but they were too wise to wish to tear me from my obsession. In their kindness, they affirmed that you would stay just as you were: and my parting with them and with you was solemn and sweet, a last comfort in a nightmare already reaching to the recesses of my head: and I said at the last: 'Stay just as you are.'

That was my last cry of absolute happiness, and it stayed in my ears as I made the crossing to the continent where I was born and where my inner turbulence belonged. The sulky smiles of those dangerous waters filled me with foreboding. The doom of my continent soon filled the clean expanse of the sky.

Now all that is past. The dead are buried: and the maimed beg their bread: and I have come back for you, for my whole happiness, for that which has stood next to God in my prayers. My prayers changed little during those years: they belonged to that part of me which was steadfast, that part which took the whole force of my great fear, my anger and my weariness. I will allow that I am scarred, inside and out, as indeed are most people upon the continent who tell themselves and each other that they are lucky to be alive. I am much changed, I admit, though I still cherish that steadfast part of me in which has lived my hope.

As soon as I reached your beautiful island and met your people, I stepped back into a measure of my happiness; for

nothing had changed and everything was free of the doom which laid waste so much of the world. How mellow and calm with assured beauty it seemed. They told me that you too were just as you were: and my heart cried out in its sudden abundance of happiness like the living water in your island streams.

And so you are. Others have grown older and the world has been convulsed. I have lived through fifty years of hard life in the handful of years since I went away saying 'Stay just as you are.' I too had changed. All but that which remained steadfast.

How have you, of all people, now changed that? You have remained yourself in every minute particular. You are still gloriously young, lightly, tenderly skittish, not matured at all, nor developed beyond that charming childish assurance. When you kept saying 'I haven't changed, have I?' you might have thought it odd that I could say 'No' and 'No' and no more. You might have noticed my astonished recognition that you had not changed. But you were so happy, so absorbed in happiness, so self-sufficiently and uninquisitively happy that I suppose you did not notice much—I suppose you never did notice much.

You prattle and you laugh, and I recognise both words and laughter like a tune performed with a certain touch and recorded and always played the same way. Then you kiss me. I recognise the kiss. Yes, I use the word '*recognise*' advisedly. Your kiss is precisely as I remember it. It is the same kiss. You are just as you were. Then what has happened to me, I ask myself, that that longed-for, so desirable greeting should be a sweet out of a box, a well-remembered view, the loved exact savour of, say, the carnations which seem to grow upon your island with a greater profusion than anywhere else on earth and which when I encountered them elsewhere during my years of trouble, would bring tears to my eyes.

When I left you, I knew that I should never see you again. When your people came up and pointed the wonder of it that you have never changed I lied to them and said it was wonderful. When they told me how I had changed, I believed them. Though they will never understand how finally I came to change upon your very island in your very presence. That which was steadfast in me has changed because you are the same. You have stayed just as you were.

I have written this down because I wish to leave some record of myself. I believe I had the respect of my fellow-men upon the continent during the years of struggle and now I need your respect at my going. I wish you to know that you are everything I asked you to be, *no more and no less*.

I believe that you will read this and fold it with small and fragrant regrets and place it in a bundle in your lavender-scented chest. Then I believe you will live happily ever after amid the beauty of your island which I see now for the last time.

You will stay just as you are when these discontented bones are picked clean, after a brief wooing of the sulky smiles of these waters which for so long have run between us.

लाल बहादुर शास्त्री राष्ट्रीय प्रशासन अकादमी, पुस्तकालय

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